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SIX GUNS -- SIX GRAVES!

By ROE RICHMOND

•

RENEGADES' RENDEZVOUS

by AL STORM

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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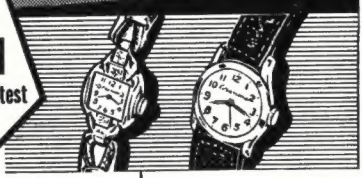

TODAY! . . . here on this very page!. . . is an amazing contest opportunity that combines fascinating puzzle-solving enjoyment with fabulous cash prizes . . . *PLUS a guaranteed reward for EVERYBODY who completes the contest.*

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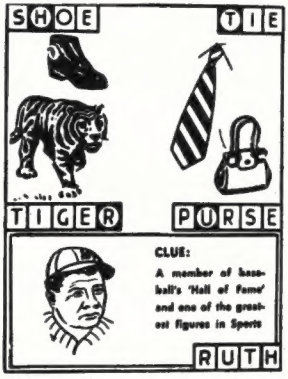
See Sample Puzzle at Upper Right!

This contest consists of puzzles like the SAMPLE PUZZLE above. Note how we filled it in . . . how we identified the objects and found that certain letters in the names of the objects stood out from the rest, thus to spell out the name of the famous person pictured at the bottom. Read the explanation carefully.

Note how we identified each object with a word of as many letters as there are boxes in diagram accompanying it. In upper left we filled in word SHOE; in upper right, TIE. In lower left, TIGER; in lower right, PURSE. Note that some of the letters fell into boxes with a little circular frame inside. Those "circled" letters, arranged into proper order, spell out the famous name we are looking for.

Here, for example, the "circled" letters are H T R U. So we run through the names printed under the puzzle and discover Babe RUTH, whose last name is the correct solution, and whose picture you see at bottom.

SAMPLE PUZZLE



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EXCITING WESTERN

Vol. 25, No. 2

MAY 1953

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

A Novel

SIX GUNS—SIX GRAVES! Roe Richmond 10
How long they had been there, none of them knew. How long before the end, only Sam Colt could say

Three Novelets

THE MAN FROM CALICO CREEK Tom Roan 54
There was a gun in the Kid's back, but who knew that? To Calico Creek, he was every man's meat!

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Everything about him said: This hardcase for hire. Yet this time, Blue Bowers' guns smoked for free

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His antlers were bloody, hut his head unbowed. . . .

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EVERETT H. ORTNER, Editor

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TRAIL BLAZERS

They were rough-and-ready men, those Rangers. And they never knew old age

HERE'S some dope on the early-day Texas Rangers; the kind of men they were and how they lived and operated. I'm speaking of the tough old pre-Civil War boys, not the ones you read about in books and see depicted in the movies. The first requisite was courage to a high degree, and any who lacked it didn't stay in the service very long. Next came youth plus skill in horsemanship and the use of rifle, pistol and knife. John Hays was a captain at twenty-three, a major at twenty-five, a colonel at thirty-one, and his services were finished before he was thirty-four. Sam Walker, of Walker Colt fame, was killed when thirty-five, McCulloch was dead at thirty-five, McNelly at thirty-three. All famous leaders.

Here's what John C. Caperton wrote about his fellow Rangers in 1843, two years before Texas attained statehood:

> Each man was armed with a rifle, a pistol, and a knife, and with a Mexican blanket tied behind his saddle, and a small wallet in which he carried his salt and ammunition. Sometimes he carried a little *panoln*, or parched corn, spiced and sweetened, a great allayer of thirst, and tobacco. With these he was equipped for months. He moved as lightly over the prairie as the Indians did, and lived as they did, without tents, with a saddle for a pillow at night, blankets over them, and their feet to the fire. Depending wholly upon wild game for food, they of course sometimes found a scarcity of it, and suffered the privations which are known to all hunters. Sometimes there was a necessity of killing a horse for food, when all else failed. They used the Mexican saddle, improved somewhat by the Americans, and carried both the Mexican *riata*, made of rawhide, and the lariat, used to rope horses with.
>
> He would put a layer of grass, or small brush, beneath his pallet, to avoid being chilled by the cold ground, and to prevent his blankets from becoming saturated in case of rain. His gun coat was placed over saddle and rigging; his gun was by his side; boots and pistol beside his saddle pillow, to which his rations were fastened right after supper, in case of trouble. His head was to the north, his feet to the south, at the fire, in case he dared have one. The least noise brought him awake and in fighting trim. In those days it was victory or death. The Ranger would give quarter, but he never asked for it.
>
> He always camped on the south side of a thicket. In summer he always had the advantage of a south breeze, and in winter it afforded protection against the Northers. Running streams were passed at once, to avoid the possibility of a sudden rise, and consequent delay. Swollen streams were crossed in various ways: the construction of a raft; or by tying stake-ropes together and stretching them from bank to bank, putting a stirrup on the line, attaching ropes thereto on the other side. A rig was made to hold whatever had to be crossed, and the loaded rig was suspended from the stirrup and drawn over the stream. A third way was by making a sack of rawhide, in which the baggage was deposited, logs lashed to it to keep it from sinking, and the whole drawn across with a rope.
>
> Rangers swam by the sides of their horses and guided them. . No kind of weather stopped us from crossing; during "northers" and while sleet and snow were falling. The one idea ruled—make a rapid, noiseless march—strike the foe while he was not on the alert—punish him—crush him! Braver men never pulled a trigger or wielded a blade."

Such was what Ranger John S. Ford wrote of their lives in those days. There were few roads and these the Rangers avoided anyhow. They traveled by the sun, the stars, and the course of Texas streams, which always flow southeast. Between these streams they traveled on the divides and always could tell almost exactly where they were in a wilderness stretching for hundreds of miles. Whenever possible, they always dismounted to fight because their crude arms could not be reloaded rapidly while on horseback.

Then one of them, Samuel Walker, and old

Colonel Colt, solved the problem and made an already tough, fearless fighting man into the deadliest fighting man in the entire world at that time. Here's the inside story:

Colt had received his original patent on February 26, 1836, and shortly afterward began to turn out a .34 caliber pistol with an octagonal barrel, four and one-half inches in length. It had a concealed trigger until the gun was cocked. No trigger guard. The pistol had to be taken apart in three pieces to reload it. The Federal Government had turned thumbs down on the weapon for military use, but somehow a few of them found their way into Texas at a price, so it was reported, of two hundred dollars each. The delighted Rangers found that they now could fight much more on horseback, but they still were not satisfied. About that time Samuel Walker was sent back to buy arms for the brand new Republic of Texas.

The Ranger met Colt in an arms dealer and gunsmith's store and told him that while the gun was the best of its kind, a man riding "hell for leather" couldn't hold three parts in his hand to reload, because it rendered a good knife hand useless. Colt quickly said, "Come on, Mr. Walker," and they hurried to the factory over in Paterson, New Jersey. For several days and nights Walker and the inventor pored over drawings and worked over lathes and drills, after which Walker had to return home.

JUST one month later the new model, the "Walker Revolver," was advertised and put on the market. It was much heavier and longer and the grip had been designed to fit snugly in the hand. The trigger was visible and protected by a guard. The bore had been enlarged from .34 to a .44 and in some later models to a .47. With that much weight in hand, and a perfect grip on it, the Rangers quickly discovered they had the ideal weapon to spur alongside a fleeing Comanche and crush in his skull with the barrel.

The rest is Ranger history. Alone and without military aid, these small bodies of men whipped up to fifty times their numbers of Indians, Mexican outlaws, and white renegades. They alone protected all of Texas from the ravages of the marauders until the Civil War broke out in 1861. They fought through that war, came home to worse conditions than before it, and took up the fight again until Federal troops could be sent in. These Northern soldiers tried hard enough but found themselves outfought and outclassed.

It was the Texas Rangers who showed them how.

See you next issue. . . .

—*William Hopson*

He Asked Permission to Stay

Major William E. Barber, USMC

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

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THE NIGHT CHEYENNE HOWLED

By Warren Black

SINCE the rodeo was a sport that just "kind of growed up" there has been quite a lot of confusion about its exact origin. However, there is a story about the famous Cheyenne Frontier Days, which claims to be the daddy of all rodeos and which, if true, would indicate that at least this famous event was the outgrowth of the fact that a town in Colorado was proud of its potato crop.

Back in the 1890's, Colorado was so proud of its fine spuds that it started an annual potato day celebration at Greeley, Colorado, and while it was not exactly a Rose Bowl Festival, it was an occasion for letting off quite a bit of steam in Greeley.

A group of civic-minded citizens from Cheyenne went to the shindig and noticed that the cash registers of the Greeley merchants jingled merrily while the visitors were there. On the way home, they sat on the train and discussed the problem of inducing their own cash registers to sing out a few tunes.

Since Cheyenne didn't raise spuds, but did raise beef, they decided to build their own local show around the cattle industry. That meant rodeo, of course, and so they decided on an annual rodeo event.

It happened that the Cheyenne party contained a big cattleman, the local newspaper man, and the passenger agent for the railroad which ran through Cheyenne. This was a natural setup for such a promotion, and they got right to work on it with typical Western energy. And on September 23rd, 1897, this oldest and most famous of all rodeos went into action.

The Union Pacific Railroad ran three special trains to the fair grounds an hour apart, there was plenty of beer, liquor and eats served on the grounds, and four thousand people showed up. That was quite a crowd for a frontier town in those days.

As added attractions, an Army detachment put on a sham battle, and a group of genuine Sioux Indians performed their war dances. And there were enough fist and gunfights put on for free by the spectators who had spent too much time at the liquor tents to satisfy everybody.

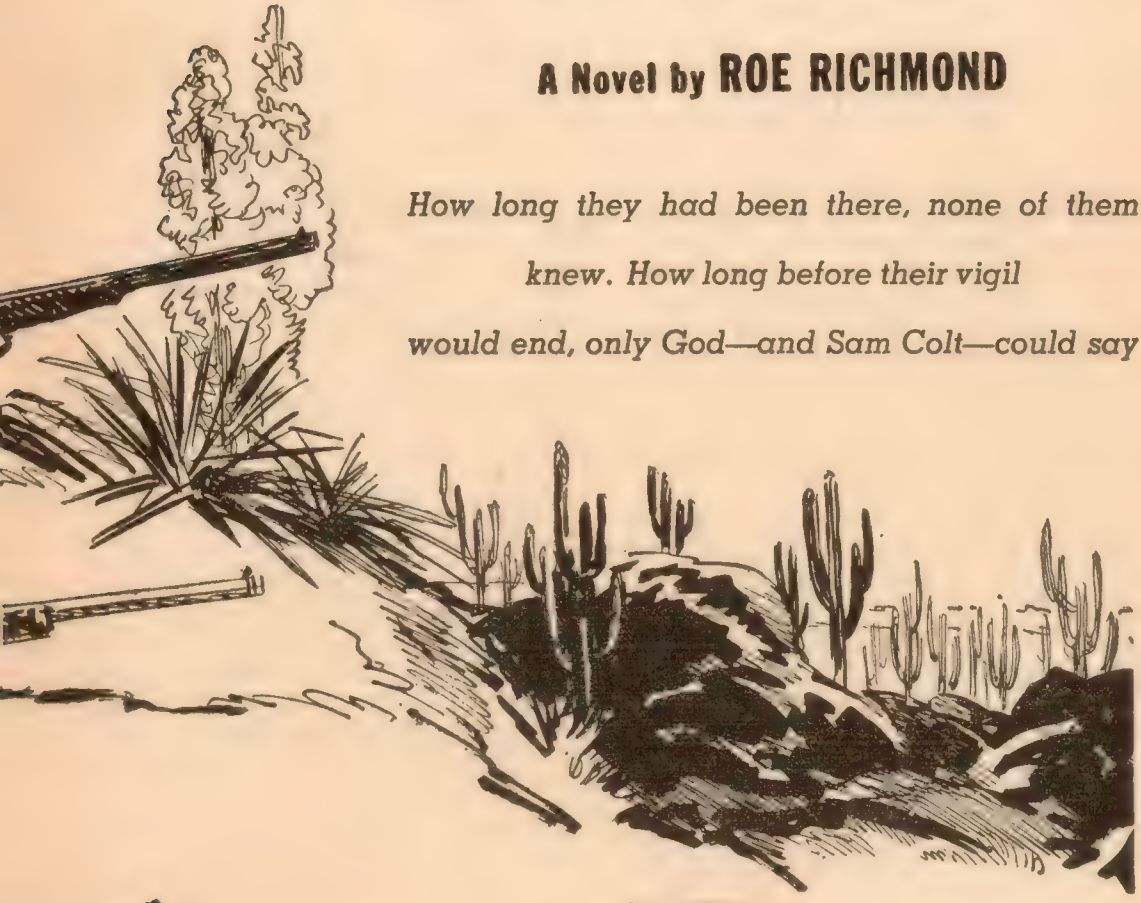
The wild horses they used were the real McCoy, having been captured and brought in especially for the event, and they needed no bucking straps to pull the trigger on them. The current report of the event says that when the animals were mounted, they jumped fences, hit for the open country with their riders aboard, and knocked down and wounded spectators by the scores. It was probably the wildest wild-horse-riding event in rodeo history. ●●●

SIX GUNS—

SIX GRAVES!

A Novel by ROE RICHMOND

How long they had been there, none of them knew. How long before their vigil would end, only God—and Sam Colt—could say



CHAPTER I
Hell Warmed Over

THE heat bore down like molten iron, and the abrasive sound of hoofs rose through the clouding dust. Nate Cardell shifted in the scalding wet leather, and raised his broad bulk on cramped legs. Saddle-hardened as he was, he felt split to the shoulders, sun-blinded and choking with alkali.

At the head of the little column, Niles Terence and Hook Breason reined up on the naked spine of a ridge. Fanned out on either side, the

others sat staring at the vast blistered wastelands, spread like some grotesque relief map before them. Seven riders—six men and a woman—and four pack-horses.

"There she is—the Strip," said Hook Breason, blunt fingers rubbing a stubbled jaw.

"Looks like hell burnt out and warmed over," grumbled old Frank Hildner. "The land God forgot and nobody else would take."

"Safe, though," Niles Terence said, slim and erect, and with his pleasant smile. "Twenty thousand square miles that the law never touched and never will."

Deak Fenray laughed mockingly and pulled at his sharp beak of a nose. "Why should the law bother? Anybody living here's worse off than they'd be in jail."

Choya Valdez's laugh was as gay as always. "You never been in Yuma, amigo. You wouldn't talk like that if you had."

"But what can people *do* here?" asked Kate Moran, surveying the tortured landscape with dismay.

"Raise cattle and horses," Nate Cardell said, slow and easy. "Don't ask me what they feed on, though."

He had expected desolation, but nothing the equal of this. It far surpassed all other desert wildernesses he had known, weirdly broken, ridged and gullied and potholed, raw and ugly. A bleak sun-scorched terrain, twisted and crumpled and gashed, faulted and upthrust and cratered like the moon.

The riders had halted at the northern rim of the Strip. In the south, it was cut off from the rest of Arizona by the fabulous Grand Canyon of the Colorado River.

"Let's go," Hook Breason said, urging his jaded mount forward down the boulder-scattered slope. A big rugged man, crag-faced and rock-jawed, driving against all the odds of nature and humanity and fate.

Niles Terence smiled. "Others live here, and so can we." In spite of trail dust, furnace-heat and the rigors of a forced march across arid wastes, he somehow managed to look groomed and cool and immaculate.

"But where we going to spend all our money, boss?" inquired Choya Valdez, grinning and happy-go-lucky, finding a joke in all things.

"It'll keep," Niles Terence told him. "Plenty of time to enjoy it later."

IT WAS ironical, though, Cardell reflected wryly, falling in behind with Frank Hildner. Loaded down with wealth from banks and stage-coaches and trains, they had come to this barren sun-blasted country in the northwestern corner of Arizona, where money was virtually useless. A final resort and refuge, with all Nevada and Utah and New Mexico up in arms after them.

That last job, the one Terence and Breason had insisted on against the will of the others, had nearly finished them. They had ridden one cavvy of horses almost to death, stolen this bunch at gun point from a livery barn in St. George, and shot their way out of town. A close call all around. They were fortunate to be alive, even in this isolated hell-hole. A tight-knit outlaw band packing a fortune, with nowhere left to go but the Arizona Strip.

Once more Cardell wondered what he was doing with this crew, outside of the law. He was fond of the girl, Kate Moran, regardless of her infatuation for Niles Terence. He liked old Frank Hildner and young Choya Valdez, but he had no use for the sly coyote-faced Deak Fenray. As for Terence and Hook Breason, he could admire and respect their courage and wits and fighting ability, but he could not like them as men. Breason was too brutal, and Terence was fully as ruthless, in a more refined manner.

Well, Cardell was with them, as guilty as they were, and it was too late for regrets or thoughts of turning back. He had shared in the plunder. The blood of the men they had killed was on his head, as well as theirs, although Cardell hadn't shot to kill when they had been forced to fight their way out after holdups. Yet the brand of killer was on him, and he would be shot down or strung up as fast as any of them. The bottle was to blame, of

course, as it had been for all of Cardell's misfortune.

Whisky had cost him his girl and his last riding job, and had got him into that gunfight with Curly Forbes. Then Niles Terence and his gang had saved Cardell from the posse that was out to avenge Forbes's death, and Cardell had fallen in and drifted along with the Terence outfit from one robbery to another.

Built strong and solid, with thick black hair, steady brown eyes, and a square somber face, Cardell looked like a man without weakness, thoroughly master of himself. But he was flawed by that one failing—a thirst for liquor, which he couldn't always curb and control and which controlled him.

Frank Hildner turned his gaunt mahogany face to Cardell, as they jogged down the long grade, his faded eyes pale in the dark weathered skin.

"Bad country, Card, for a bunch like this. Somebody'll crack and break. There'll be trouble a-plenty here." He wagged his gray head morbidly.

"Where else could we go, Frank?" asked Cardell.

Hildner shrugged his sagging shoulders. "Don't know, Card. But this ain't good. I can feel it inside me."

Cardell had something of the same premonition, but there was no sense in brooding about it. "Cheer up, Frank. We'll come out of it one way or another, just wait and see."

"Maybe," Hildner muttered. "Maybe I'm just tired—and old."

They were heading into the Pakoon, the western edge of the Strip, Frank Hildner said, the most God-forsaken part of the whole area. Dry arroyos and sand gullies snaked crazily among great thrusting masses of malachite and sandstone, and seared brown hillsides were studded with rock pillars of violent colors. Gnarled forests of Joshua trees stretched away in the distance, and here and there patches of grass marked tiny springs or creeks. To the east was the Parashaunt, and beyond that section loomed the 8,000-foot bulk of Mt. Trumbull wtih its lava beds.

HILDNER told Cardell "Mormons opened up the Strip to graze their stock in the Sixties, Dixie Mission Mormons, they called 'em, pioneering the south end of Utah. St. George, where we got the horses, was their main settlement. Fredonia, over east of here in the Strip, was settled by Mormon wives, come across into Arizona to get clear of the law and have their babies. Used to call it the Lambing Grounds." Hildner chuckled and spat tobacco juice through his stained gray whiskers. "Nobody ever come here unless they was running away from something."

Cardell was surprised and interested in the old-timer's recollections, but Hildner fell abruptly silent after this one informative outburst. They passed a few abandoned cabins and shacks, crumbling and half-buried by sand drifts, the moldering remnants of their rainwater tanks still in evidence.

The bunch camped out that first night, on a bench wooded with mesquite in the lee of a ridge overlooking the sage and sand flats. At Frank Hildner's suggestion, they avoided the deep arroyos, because of the danger of flash floods in this country.

Around the fire that evening, Cardell studied his companions, their features etched in ruddy light and shadow.

Kate Moran was a tall, lithe, handsome girl, with chestnut hair fired to red-gold in the glare, features fine and clear, eyes blue-gray, and a mouth wide and expressive. A nice girl, betrayed by her emotions, by her love for Terence. It was easy to see why women went for the graceful, debonair Niles Terence. He was darkly good-looking with his steel-gray eyes, winning smile, and natural charm. He did everything with a certain flair that marked him apart. His slightest move seemed classical. But Niles Terence was no good for Kate or anyone else, strictly for himself in the final analysis, Cardell estimated.

Hook Breason was all brute strength and driving power, as arrogant and destructive in actuality as he appeared to be in face and raw-boned form. Physically stronger than Terence, but less intelligent and therefore less dangerous, Deak Fen-

ray was weasel-sleek and sharp. Evil showed in his beaked face and bitter black eyes, in the insolence of his buck-toothed smile. Those three were the real bad men of the outfit, professional killers and bandits by wilful choice and nature.

Choya Valdez, a slight wisp of a laughing boy, with black curls and brilliant liquid-fire eyes, loved the excitement and action more than the spoils. He was more like a rebellious and adventuresome school kid than a wicked outlaw, and Cardell thought there was a great deal of good in this youngster of mixed blood.

And old Frank Hildner wasn't essentially bad either. He had tried to live honestly, but it hadn't seemed to pay off in his case. The breaks always had gone against him, favoring more unscrupulous and greedy men. In middle-aged disgust, after many heart-breaking setbacks and failures, Frank Hildner had finally turned against law and order.

Cardell himself was an outlaw by accident more than by design. Bereft of his girl and his job and on a prolonged bender, forced into a whisky-inspired gun battle, he had become a fugitive after killing his man in a fair standup fight. Grateful when Terence and his riders rescued him from that posse, saving his life without any doubt, Cardell had agreed to join them for a caper or two. Once started, there had been no stopping. He had been riding outside the law for over a year now, a full-fledged bandit at twenty-eight.

They divided the take from their last job, a bank robbery, around the campfire that night. It was better for each man to carry his own, in case they had to split up in scattered flight. Terence and Kate and Breason took one half, the other four sharing the remainder.

When the money had been distributed, Choya Valdez smiled at Fenray.

"Didn't you pick up a little bag of gold in that last place, Deak?"

Fenray glared at him, with murder in his black eyes, then forced a laugh and turned to his saddle-bags. "Forgot all about it. Ain't much but it goes into the split."

HE TOSSED the small buckskin pouch to Niles Terence, who was watching him with cold amusement.

"Everything always goes in the pot, Deak," said Hook Breason, his face ugly.

"I know, Hook. I never hold out nothing. Just plumb forgot this." Fenray was calmly at ease again, but his dark glance flickered to Valdez's laughing Latin features.

Frank Hildner nodded at Cardell, as if to say, The first breach. Watch it grow wider and deeper.

Kate Moran rose and skirted the firelit circle, to sit down beside Cardell. She came to him at times, as if wearied of the others, and her conversation with Cardell was lightly pleasant and gratifying. The girl seemed to sense a difference in this mild, quiet man, a broader interest and understanding of life and people and events, an innate decency and sympathy that the others lacked. It was casual and meaningless, but Niles Terence's gray eyes were on them with cool superior tolerance. Terence was too self-assured to be jealous, yet it sometimes irked him when Kate devoted herself to another man, and he had observed it was usually Cardell whom she sought.

Slightly uncomfortable under the scrutiny, and annoyed with himself for being so, Cardell was relieved when Terence suggested it was time to hit the blankets.

The men stood watch in their customary order, with Deak Fenray having the first sentry shift.

Cardell lay awake in his bedroll, trusting Deak less than ever now. Fenray had killed men for smaller reasons than Valdez had given him tonight. The sky over the Strip was unnaturally bright and clear, the stars sparkling with ethereal brilliance, the moonlight having an almost tangible quality that picked out the finest details of mesquite leaves, cactus spines, mica-flecked stones and pebbles, even grains of sand.

Cardell wondered just how much cash he had in his money-belt and wallet and saddle-bags. He had lost track of it recently. It had ceased to be important. Once it

would have meant a new start in life, a spread of his own with cattle wearing his iron; a freighting business, a store or saloon, some kind of private enterprise. And after a while, a wife and family.

Now it meant nothing, particularly out here. He must have close to fifty thousand, even after all he had blown on whisky and gambling and women in the wild towns. Yet he was poorer than he had ever been before, in this aimless, wandering life.

CHAPTER II

Oasis in the Wasteland

ON the third afternoon, they came upon the first evidence of human habitation in the Pakoon, although they had seen herds of wild horses and half-wild cattle in the distance. A long, low, main building of logs faced a creek that was thinly fringed with willow and alder and salt cedar. A barn and sheds of plank construction were behind the log house and horses were in a corral formed by upright poles and brush. In the background stock drifted and grazed in sun-cured grass.

A lean, lanky man with sparse white hair and chin whiskers framing his bony, red-bronzed face, appeared in the main doorway of the trading post.

"Light and rest, out of the sun," he drawled, with a homely smile of welcome, as they drew up at the hitch-rack. "Food and drink inside, if you care for it. Name of Naylor. They call me Nails to my face, Old Nails to my back."

His friendliness seemed genuine, Cardell thought, as he swung down and tied his slate-gray gelding loosely to the worn bleached rail. It was good and reassuring to encounter other human life in this vast, empty desert.

"You mean something to drink besides water, señor?" asked the grinning Choya Valdez.

"Sure do," Naylor said. "Whisky and beer, if you like."

"A true oasis," declared Valdez in delight, and Cardell felt a familiar craving flash in his dry throat.

Niles Terence escorted Kate to the door, held open by Naylor, and Hook Breason and the rest filed inside after them. The interior was dim and relatively cool, crammed with merchandise and supplies of all kinds, with a store counter to the left, and a bar on the right.

It was more than they had hoped for in the Strip. Their sun-blackened faces were pleased and relaxed, as they paced about to stretch and ease saddle-cramped limbs and bodies. A real well-stocked store and barroom, with real glass windows in the thick log walls.

A short fat woman with a plump, jolly face joined the proprietor, beaming at the new arrivals.

"Ma Nails," said Naylor, with quiet pride and affection, his gnarled hand on her full, rounded shoulder. "And the young Naylors—Judy and Bob."

A blonde girl of about twenty, and a skinny tow-headed boy of maybe fifteen had entered from the living quarters in the left wing. They stood smiling shyly behind their parents. A nice family group, Cardell thought. The girl was pretty and well-formed, almost beautiful in the bloom of youth, and the eyes of the riders lingered on her.

Hunger was plain on the rough face of Breason and the sharp features of Fenray, while Terence's gray gaze was coolly appraising. Choya Valdez showed a quick boyish interest, bowing and smiling his handsomest for Judy Naylor. Old Frank Hildner was beyond more than a casual fatherly regard for youthful femininity. Cardell himself saw the Naylors as a close family unit, rather than as individuals.

The beer was warm but good, soothing their parched throats, and the whisky was full of fire and authority. Cardell was contemplating his second glassful of liquor when Terence said in an undertone, "Take it easy on that, Card."

Cardell nodded, without resentment, secure in his knowledge that the mood for

heavy drinking was not on him. "Sure, Niles," he said evenly.

Most of the time Cardell could handle the stuff all right. Only at long intervals did the madness grip him, and drive him to empty botte after bottle in a kind of desperate search for oblivion.

Ma Naylor and her children had retired, leaving Old Nails behind the bar. Cardell stood between Valdez and Hildner at one end, with Breason and Fenray lounging at the other, while Terence sat at a table with Kate Moran.

"Where do your customers come from, Nails?" inquired Cardell.

"More folks in the Pakoon than you'd figure," Naylor said. "Pretty scattered, but they all get in here every so often."

"How do you get your goods in here?" asked Hildner.

"Freighter comes in about once a month. It costs some, and that's why my prices are high. I been called a robber, but I never try to hold people up. Can't operate without making a decent profit, that's all."

NAYLOR asked no questions himself. He knew what generally drove men into the Strip, and riders like these didn't wear two guns for show. The presence of Kate plainly puzzled him a little. It took the strong love of a strong woman to make her follow a man into the Pakoon, and girls who rode with brush-runners like these men weren't apt to qualify, as a rule. But this girl might be tougher than she looked. She rode like a man, and could probably use that Colt she packed.

They had heard no hoofbeats outside, no sounds of approach. It was a complete surprise when the back door opened, and three men pushed in with guns in hand.

"Just set tight till we get a good look at you," said the big burly man in advance, shaggy brown head and beard thrust at them.

"Now, Buffalo, you put up them irons," Naylor said. "There ain't anybody here wants trouble with you."

Laughter rumbled from the bearded giant. "They don't look like law, but you can't always tell, Nails. They're carrying a lot of iron, ain't they, Rawhide?" He glanced at the lean wiry man on his left, who went on munching tobacco and squinting at the occupants of the room. "Got a right purty gal with 'em too, huh, Montana?" The squat, bow-legged man at his right nodded and said, "Reckon they're all right, Buff."

Buffalo grunted and scratched his brown whiskers. "If they ain't, they won't last long here, Monty, and that's whatever."

Rawhide grinned and spat accurately at a brass cuspidor. "Let's try some of Nails's store rotgut, boys. It ain't much after drinking our own, but it's a change anyhow."

Niles Terence got up and stood slim and graceful before them, motioning Breason and Fenray to make room at the bar. "I'm buying, gentlemen. Step up and order."

"Right generous of you, friend," said Buffalo. "Business must be good on the outside."

"It was," Terence admitted. "Until it got a bit too warm for comfort."

"You come to the right place, if you're on the dodge," Montana said. "The law'll never get this far into the Strip."

"It'll come some day, you mark my word," growled Buffalo. "All these two-bit tinhorn badmen crowding in here ain't no help neither." He glared at Terence. "You sure there ain't nobody on your tracks, sonny?"

"If there was you wouldn't have caught us sitting here on our hands," Niles Terence told the big man.

"Planning on squattin' here?" Buffalo demanded.

"Questions like that aren't polite in the Pakoon," said Terence.

Buffalo bellowed with laughter. "Politeness ain't necessary when you got the drop, son. But we'll let that pass and do some drinking. Fill 'em up all around again, Nails, and leave a few bottles out handy. On me from here on, friends. Hospitality of the Strip."

The three old-time fugitives were affable enough, once the whisky was flowing freely and they were convinced that the

Valdez held him under water until the wild struggles had ceased

new arrivals were brother outlaws. When the veteran trio was leaving, after loading up with provisions, Buffalo invited all hands to come up and visit their domain in the hills, drink some real home-made firewater and look over their herds of cattle and horses.

"We come here to get away from the lawdogs," said Buffalo, grinning through his beard, "and we end up making an honest living here. Maybe we done some mavericking and long-roping to get started, but I never saw a rancher yet that didn't."

The sound of hoofbeats brought the slim quick Rawhide to a front window. "Just that young Kid Lonesome," he reported, with a casual gesture. "Coming to court Judy Naylor, I reckon."

"Well, he's a mighty nice boy, Rawhide," said Naylor, and turned to explain to the others. "Real name of Steve Elrod. Comes and goes all the time, always riding

alone. Don't know what he's dodgin', but it can't be anything very bad. Steve's a good, solid boy."

BUFFALO and his companions waited to exchange greetings with Kid Lonesome, as he entered the front way, then lugged their supplies out the back door.

Cardell observed that Steve Elrod was lanky and loose-jointed, with sun-streaked blond hair, a shy, friendly, boyish smile and eyes of clear green. Cardell felt instantly drawn to him, without knowing why.

Terence, Breason and Fenray, after a brief cold survey, seemed to discard Elrod as of no account, but Kate Moran revealed a flicker of interest. Choya Valdez saw a kindred spirit in him, and old Frank Hildner nodded in silent approval of the long, limber young man.

Steve Elrod greeted Naylor with quiet warmth, nodded pleasantly at the others, and sipped at the beer Nails handed him with the inquiry, "You see the Bakers, Steve? They ain't been around lately."

"Moved out, Nails," said the tall tawny-haired Elrod. "Lost all their stock, I reckon, and decided to give it up."

"Them old renegades that just left here, Steve?"

"Couldn't say as to that," Steve Elrod drawled. "But it's possible. Buffalo likes to keep building."

Naylor glanced at Cardell and his comrades and explained, "Little spread a couple miles south of here. You might take a look, if you're planning on stayin' hereabouts. House, barn, sheds and corral. Rainwater cistern and the creek close by."

"Sounds pretty good," Cardell said, looking at Niles Terence.

"Sure, we'll have a look," Terence agreed. "Got to light and rest somewheres."

Steve Elrod finished his beer. "If you'll excuse me, Nails, I'll see Judy for a minute."

"Go right ahead, son," said Naylor.

Deak Fenray shouldered into Elrod, as he started away from the bar. "You ain't hardly man enough, button, to come calling on a girl like that one." With a few drinks down, Fenray always turned mean and hunted for trouble, his hatchet-face and black eyes ugly and menacing.

Elrod regarded him with cool mild surprise, drawling, "Is that for you to say, mister?"

"It is if I want it to be, button." Fenray squared off, ready to swing or draw, as the occasion might call for.

"Nails don't want any ruckus in here," Elrod said quietly.

"Plenty room outside," said Deak Fenray.

Cardell started forward, but Choya Valdez was ahead of him, cutting in between the two. "Pull in your horns, Deak. What's the matter with you?"

"Mind your own business, Mex," warned Fenray, elbowing Valdez aside and striding toward Elrod.

Then Hook Breason was there, catching Fenray by the arm, yanking him backward and spinning him in against the counter.

"Go ahead, kid," Breason said. "This hombre must be drunk." Elrod left the room, going into the living quarters, and Breason wheeled on Fenray. "What kind of a damn-fool play was that, Deak?"

"Wanted to have a little fun, that's all," Fenray mumbled sullenly, eyes flicking past Breason's great shoulder to fasten on the face of Choya Valdez.

Breason tapped Fenray's arm. "No more whisky for this one, old man."

Niles Terence rose from Kate Moran's side and stepped in. "No more for any of us. We'll buy some grub and go look at that Baker place. Get outside and wait, Fenray. You're on water rations now."

With Deak Fenray gone, Terence bought another round of whisky and set about purchasing staple provisions, with Kate and the others adding suggestions from time to time.

Choya Valdez leaned on the wood near Cardell and Hildner, murmuring, "I'd feel a lot better if that Fenray was far away from here."

Cardell nodded darkly, and old Frank

Hildner said, "There's always one bad one, and the rot spreads. It won't take the law to bust up this bunch, boys. It's already begun eating us up from inside. Just like I figured, Card."

CHAPTER III

Outlaw Haven

THE recently abandoned Baker spread, sprawled on a shelf above the stream, was ramshackle, filthy and rundown, but after a thorough cleaning and policing it was habitable. Kate Moran took charge of the log house, working harder than any of them, while Niles Terence conducted the operations around the plank barn, lean-to sheds, and yard.

The corral was in fair shape and would hold their horses. The water tank was sound and comparatively clean. In a few days the layout looked better than it had since it was first constructed, and they had quite a decent, comfortable place to live in.

After the chores of cleaning up, they required a couple of days' rest, and then boredom and restlessness began to set in. Niles Terence knew he'd have to think of something to keep the men occupied, or there'd be some kind of an internal explosion. He had set a rule against gambling, which some of them resented, even though they realized the wisdom of it.

"Why don't we buy some cattle to run and do a little ranching here, Niles?" offered Cardell one morning, as they lounged in the shade of the brush ramada in front of the house.

"Good idea, Card," said Choya Valdez. "Might as well spend our money some way."

Hook Breason snorted and spat. "Why buy 'em when they're so easy to run off? And Deak here such an expert with the running iron and altering knife. There's no law in the Strip."

"Ain't we fought and run enough, Hook?" protested old Frank Hildner. "Now that we can afford it, we ought to live legal and peaceful. No sense in fighting the whole Pakoon."

"No sense in wasting our money neither," rasped Deak Fenray. "We're going to need a little excitement to keep alive in this hell-hole. Who's going to stand up against the six of us?"

"Them three old-timers—Buffalo and Rawhide and Montana," said Frank Hildner.

Fenray laughed jeeringly. "They're about as old and worthless as you are, Frank. They're long past being dangerous, grampa."

"Don't be too sure of that, Deak," warned Choya Valdez. "Those old *caballeros* are still tough."

"You going chicken on us, Mexican?" sneered Fenray.

Niles Terence gestured impatiently. "Shut up! I'll think it over and decide what to do."

"We don't have nothing to say about it, Niles?" asked Hook Breason, a hint of malice in his tone.

"You always have had your say," Terence reminded him. "Don't be so edgy, Hook."

Kate Moran spoke from the doorway. "I think Card and Frank and Choya are right, Niles. Why stir up trouble, when there's no need of it? We can buy all the cows we need and never miss the money."

"Nobody asked you, Kate," said Niles Terence, softly but firmly. "You run the kitchen and keep the house."

He got up and sauntered off toward the out-buildings. After a few minutes, Hook Breason wandered after him, trailed a bit later by Deak Fenray.

Cardell smiled wryly and shook his dark head. "Reckon we're going to do some cattle rustling here."

Kate Moran's blue-gray eyes were flashing, her full red lips thinned against white teeth. "Don't you ever get sick of taking orders, Card?" she demanded.

"Somebody has to give them." Cardell shrugged his wide shoulders. "I'm just a recruit, Kate."

"Why don't you break away then? Before it's too late, Card."

Cardell stared at her gravely. "That's kind of funny, coming from you, Kate."

"Is it?" the girl asked, her fine features inscrutable.

"Couldn't break without a battle—now," Cardell went on thoughtfully.

"You aren't afraid of that, are you, Card?"

"No, I'm not afraid."

CHOYA VALDEZ said, "The battle's coming anyway. I won't take much more from Fenray."

"Them three'll stick together, Choya," said Frank Hildner, fingering his gray mustache.

"So?" Valdez spread his palms. "I'll get Fenray. That's all I care about."

Cardell smiled at him. "We'll keep the other two off. Won't we, Frank?"

"Pretty likely," Hildner said, spitting an amber stream into the morning sunshine. "I been shooting at enough people I ain't got nothing against. Got nothing special against Terence, but it'd pleasure me some to use a gun on Fenray and Breason one of these days."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that, Frank," said Kate Moran, her chestnut head shimmering as she turned it from side to side.

Cardell smiled at her soberly. "Thought that was what you wanted, Kate?"

"Men!" She made an epithet of it, and whirled back inside the house, head high, back straight, arms and hips swinging in angry rhythm.

When Niles Terence walked back from the barn, flanked by Breason and Fenray, the decision was made, as Cardell had anticipated. "We're riding east across the Parashaunt toward Trumbull to scout around a little," Terence announced. "More cattle over that way. Kate can ride in and put up at Naylor's, if she wants to."

"We buying or stealing, Niles?" asked Cardell flatly.

"It all depends," Terence said easily.

Deak Fenray laughed. "Cardell's going noble on us, now that we've made him a rich man."

"Not exactly." Cardell's brown eyes were steady and somber on that bird-of-prey face. "These ranchers in the Strip haven't got much. It's different than stealing from Wells Fargo and the Union Pacific and the rich banks."

"That's the way I feel about it too, Card," said Choya Valdez.

"You're both crazy," Hook Breason said. "Some of these old gophers in the Strip got more money than they'll ever be able to spend. And more stock than they know what to do with. Don't let it fool you, just because they live poor."

"Hook's right," said Niles Terence. "But if you boys want to check out—" There was a veiled threat in his well-modulated voice.

"We'll string along," Cardell said carelessly, knowing that to check out would be to invite bullets in the back. Those three wouldn't let him or anyone else get away with his share of the plunder.

"Saddle up and get going then," said Niles Terence. . . .

In the Parashaunt there were more water-holes and grasslands and scattered ranches, yet they saw few riders and little sign of human activity. No wonder that Buffalo and his partners had found it easy to run off cattle and build up their own brand in this desolate country.

Late in the afternoon, having swept a wide arc over the barren ranges that almost took them into the malpais and lava beds about the base of Mt. Trumbull, the six horsemen turned homeward, gathering and drifting bunches of cattle ahead of them, picking up more as they pushed along. The sun was rimming the western mountains, when a gruff voice hailed them from the mouth of a dry arroyo on the north:

"Hey, you! What you doing with them critters?"

"Checking brands!" Niles Terence called back. "Looking for some of our stock."

"What brand?" asked the old man, jogging toward them on a scrawny cayuse.

"Spanish Bit."

"Never heard of it in the Strip."

"We're new here," Terence told him. "Brought our own herd into the Pakoon last week. They either drifted or were rustled."

THE old man pulled up and eyed them stolidly, scratching his scraggly salt-and-pepper beard. He wore yellow galluses over a red flannel undershirt, and his pants and boots were worn and patched.

"Only rustlers here are in the Pakoon," he said. "You boys ain't reading brands. You're drivin' them steers. And most of 'em—them wearing the Hog Eye iron—belong to me."

Deak Fenray swore and started reaching for his holster, but Terence stopped him with a sharp gesture, and said, "We're just looking for our own beef, pop."

The old man grunted. "No, you ain't. You're bad ones. You got the look and smell of it on you. You're running off them steers."

"You're wrong, pop."

"Lemme cut out mine then?"

"Sure," Niles Terence said. "Cut 'em out, pop. We don't want 'em."

As the old man moved into the herd, Deak Fenray glared at Terence and jerked out his right-hand gun, firing before anybody could check him. The old man stiffened and slumped in his saddle, sighing as the cayuse reared and turned, clawing out his own Colt and shooting blindly.

Gagging and coughing blood, he toppled slowly to the earth, his pony shying away and circling around him, while the spooked cattle thundered away into the west.

Cardell threw his slate-gray horse in against Fenray's pinto, and struck with his fist, smashing that buck-toothed mouth and driving the man out of the saddle. Fenray landed flat and heavily on his back, the dust curling up about him. But he held onto his gun and was bringing it to bear on Cardell, bloody lips skinned back on broken protruding teeth, when Choya

[*Turn page*]

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Valdez leaped down and landed with both knees on Fenray's chest, left hand on Fenray's gun wrist, right hand gripping the throat.

Deak Fenray heaved and squirmed and kicked, but Valdez held him pinned securely, increasing the pressure. Fenray let go of the gun and lay motionless, his beaked face swollen purple.

"All right, Choya, let him up," Niles Terence ordered.

Valdez climbed off and Fenray got up slowly, sobbing for breath and rubbing his neck. When he bent to retrieve his gun, he nearly fell on his bloated bleeding face. Weapon in hand, he looked questioningly at Terence, who said:

"Holster it, man! How much of a damn fool can you be?"

"Cardell—hit—me," panted Fenray.

"I don't blame him," Terence said. "If I'd been close enough I'd have hit you myself. There was no need of killing that old gaffer."

"Valdez—jumped me—too," sobbed Fenray, stumbling toward his horse.

"Sure, to keep you from shooting somebody else, you maniac," Niles Terence said bitingly. "What the hell's happened to you, Deak? You never were too bright, but I never saw you act this foolish."

"He—saw us. Got a good look—at all of us. Couldn't let him—go." Deak Fenray was pleading now, baffled and panicky at having Terence turn against him.

"Climb up and shut up," Hook Breason put in. "We ought to leave you out here on foot, for pulling that one. Come on, let's round up them cattle again."

"I'll get even—with Cardell—and Valdez," muttered Deak Fenray, still struggling for air as he hauled himself into saddle.

"You'll shut your damn-fool mouth, or I'll bend a gun-barrel over your thick head!" Hook Breason snarled. "Ride now and round up them cows you scattered all over the country."

WHILE the others went on to regather the cattle, Niles Terence paused to throw the old rancher's body across his cayuse and rope it to the saddle. It was better to hide or bury him in some remote canyon than to leave him out here on the open plain. There'd be hell to pay soon enough, without asking for it at once.

That damn Deak Fenray had fixed everything up fine, and on their first time out in the Strip. Maybe Cardell and the other two had been right, at that. This bunch didn't need any stock or any more money. They should have bought a herd, if they wanted to start ranching. The Strip was their final sanctuary, and it wasn't going to last long, at this rate. Probably this old-timer had been known and liked by everybody in the whole Arizona Strip.

Cardell rode with his eye on Fenray, and spoke warningly to Valdez. "Don't turn your back on that buzzard, Choya." The hurt in Cardell's right hand was a good feeling. He had been wanting to slug Fenray for a long time.

"You sure hit him a beauty, Card," said Valdez, teeth shining white in his dark face.

"You lit on him real pretty yourself, Choya." Cardell grinned.

"I should've shot him," Choya Valdez said, features turning solemn. "I'm going to have to sooner or later, Card—if he don't get me first."

They buried the rancher in a deep narrow arroyo, tangled with brush and weeds and strewn with rocks, and turned his cayuse loose. They neared their new home in the Pakoon by moonlight, driving a couple of hundred head of cattle wearing three different brands—Hog Eye, Three Feathers and Scissors. The herd was turned into a box canyon floored with yellow sun-cured grass, some distance from the ranch.

"Well, it's started now," old Frank Hildner said, as he unsaddled his mount beside Cardell. "We had a good safe hideout here, and we had to go and spoil it. They think these old settlers in the Strip won't fight, they're crazier'n coots. Buffalo and his pards maybe get away with it, taking a little at a time, not killing anybody. But

this mad-dog pack we're runnin' with ain't going to last, Card. Not here and not anywhere else either."

Deak Fenray was bragging that he could transpose those three brands into Spanish Bit or almost anything that Niles Terence wanted, within reason.

"That'll do lots of good," Hildner grumbled under his breath. "Deak's dead already, only he don't know it. We're all dead men."

"Not yet, Frank," Cardell said soothingly. "Let's not lay down and die until somebody puts us down."

"Don't pay no attention to me, Card," sighed Hildner. "Old men get morbid, I guess."

Kate Moran wasn't at home. The log house seemed empty and cheerless. Cardell realized, with some surprise, that he had been worrying about the girl all day, and her absence took all the pleasure out of this homecoming.

CHAPTER IV

Storm Brewing

WHEN the bunch began rebranding the cattle in that box canyon, Cardell did the cutting out, Terence and Hildner the roping and stretching out, while the powerful Breason and wiry Valdez pinned and held the steers for Deak Fenray to apply the running iron and knife. If Fenray didn't alwayse achieve a perfect Spanish Bit, he blotted the original brands and attained a reasonable facsimile of the mark Terence had mentioned at random, which was intricate enough for their purposes. Altering earmarks was simple for a man of Fenray's talent.

Cardell's slate-gray gelding proved a good cutting horse, and he was enjoying the hard work when he saw dust pluming up at the mouth of the canyon. Holding the gray in, he watched the dust swirl closer, expecting to see Kate Moran emerge, perhaps with the Naylor youngsters. There were three riders all right, but they turned out to be Buffalo and Rawhide and Montana, waving a friendly greeting.

Cardell automatically slipped his guns in their sheaths, and noticed that Niles Terence and Frank Hildner were doing likewise, as they sat their mounts and watched the approaching trio. Fenray rose from the smoky heat and dust of the branding pit, and strode to the stump on which the gun-belts of the ground-men were draped, followed more deliberately by Breason and Valdez.

"Well, well, you don't waste no time, boys," boomed Buffalo jovially, and then his bearded face changed abruptly, as he scanned the herd and read some of the brands. "I hope you paid for them critters though."

"It's none of your business," Niles Terence said coldly. "But we did."

"That's good," Buffalo said. "In all our time here, we never meddled none with Hog Eye herds. Old Pat Flanagan's one of the first and best cattlemen in the Strip, and everybody thinks a lot of him. The last rannies that tried to run off Hog Eye stock ended up drug to death or hung by the neck."

"These are bought and paid for, Buffalo," said Terence.

"I sure hope so," Buffalo said. "Hate to see you boys get off on the wrong foot here. Most of these two-bit outfits are too lazy and easy-going to do anything about losing a few head, but the whole strip backs Flanagan and Hog Eye."

Deak Fenray spoke sullenly from the stump where his belted guns were hanging within easy reach. "You ain't doubting our word, are you?"

"Why no, son," said Buffalo, gazing down at the men on foot. "No call to hump your back up and spit fire. We come friendly-like and we'll give you a hand with 'em, if you want."

"We don't need no help," Fenray said. "Why don't you ride—"

Niles Terence's voice lashed out, "Shut up, Deak!" And then, as Hook Breason raised a mighty fist, as if to clout Fenray

from behind, "Hold it, Hook!" He smiled aplogetically at the three mounted veterans. "I don't know what's eating these boys of mine."

Buffalo spat in Fenray's direction. "Maybe they're too tough to be friends. Maybe they're too tough for Arizona Strip."

Deak Fenray, broken buck-teeth bared in a snarl, snatched at one of the holstered guns on the stump.

Cardell never saw a faster saddle draw than Rawhide made then, his bullet searing Fenray's hand and spraying splinters across that vulture-face. Even so, Fenray had cleared his Colt and was swinging it into line when Hook Breason's fist chopped the back of his neck.

Fenray dropped to his knees and sagged against the stump, still straining to get that gun up, but Choya Valdez raised a high-heeled boot and drove it into the middle of Fenray's spine with crushing force. Deak Fenray groaned, fell against the stump, and rolled over onto his back in the grass, moaning and gasping for breath. Valdez kicked the gun out of Fenray's grasp.

After that single shot, Rawhide held his fire, although he had Fenray and the other two ground-men helpless under his gun. Buffalo and Montana had drawn, almost simultaneously with Cardell and Terence, while old Frank Hildner brought his .44 out in a belated motion. But all of them were holding their hammers back under firm thumb-joints.

THE horses pranced and shifted nervously, scuffing up dust. And some of the cattle had started running.

Cardell snapped the tension, speaking from a taut dry throat. "We've got nothing to fight about here."

"True, son," agreed Buffalo. "But you got one bad actor there." He waved his barrel at the prostrate Fenray, then holstered his weapon, as did the other riders.

"Afraid you're right, Buffalo," said Niles Terence. "Sorry this had to happen. He's been acting loco ever since we hit the Strip."

The stocky Montana nodded, shifting his chew. "I've seen 'em that couldn't stand it out here. Too far away from the bright lights and hurdy-gurdies, the saloons and gambling tables and fancy houses, I reckon. Maybe he's one of them jaspers."

"We'll be drifting along," Buffalo said. "Come up our way sometime, when you get settled good. But don't bring that ornery one with the woodchuck teeth. The rest of you'll be welcome any time at all."

The three old-time bad men wheeled their mounts and rode out of the canyon. Deak Fenray clambered slowly upright, massaging the back of his neck and the center of his spine, but Hook Breason was holding on to Deak's gunbelt, refusing to give it up.

"That's the idea, Hook," said old Frank Hildner. "He ain't fit to wear guns."

Fenray transferred his glare of hatred from Valdez to Hildner.

Niles Terence reined over to him and said, "About one more mistake, Deak, and it'll be your last."

"Who'll brand your stock, Niles?" asked Fenray slyly.

"To hell with the stock," Terence murmured. "I wish they were back in the Parashaunt where they belong. Let's call it a day."

When they rode into the ranchyard, two riders were coming downstream from the north, and Cardell saw that it was Kate Moran and the young fellow called Kid Lonesome. He also saw the tightening of Niles Terence's handsome features, the narrowing of those steel-gray eyes.

More trouble, thought Cardell. When things break loose, there's going to be one hell of an explosion in the Strip.

Kate and Steve Elrod were chatting and laughing as they rode. Terence threw off and left his big bay for the other men to attend to, striding toward the house to await the coming of those two riders.

"Gimme my guns back, Hook," begged Deak Fenray. "This Kid Lonesome could be the law, for all we know. I can't go around without my guns, Hook. I feel naked as a jaybird."

Hook Breason laughed. "Too bad about you, Deak. You'd probably shoot this kid first, and then try to find out if he's a lawman or not. I'm keeping your guns—and your carbine, too. You're too quick on the trigger to be toting loaded weapons."

At the house, Cardell found Niles Terence and Steve Elrod talking beneath the brush ramada, but Kate had gone inside. Cardell was relieved to find things on a friendly basis, superficially at least. He wanted to see the girl, but it wouldn't be wise to rush right into the house after her.

Exchanging greetings with Elrod, he stood there and shaped a cigarette, joined in a few minutes by Hildner and Breason, Valdez and Fenray.

"See you've started stocking the ranch," Steve Elrod drawled, and Cardell felt the stiffening of his companions. "Noticed the herd when I rode by the canyon this morning. Surprised to see old Pat Flanagan selling, but maybe he needs cash for something. Great old man, Pat, isn't he?"

"Seemed to be quite an old boy," Terence agreed.

"I'm on my way to see him," Elrod said. "Have a lot of fun listening to Pat's yarns. He's got a million of 'em, and they're all good."

"What you doing in the Strip anyway?" Hook Breason asked bluntly.

"Nothing much." Elrod looked faintly surprised at this breach of Western etiquette. "Drifting around, prospecting some, hunting a little. Had a little money left me, and I like these out-of-the-way places."

"Ain't much to hunt here—but outlaws," Breason said. "You wouldn't be a U.S. marshal now, would you, young feller?"

STEVE ELROD laughed, with a note of strain. "Not that I know of. Just a fiddle-foot. Long on time and short on brains, I reckon."

Deak Fenray must have been encouraged and inspired by Breason's questioning of the tall tow-headed young man. Cardell felt someone closing up behind him, and was turning when Fenray reached out and ripped the Colt from the holster on Card's right thigh.

Cardell slashed down with his right hand, the side of it slicing viciously across Fenray's forearm. The gun blared, bright and loud, into the earthen floor of the porch. Completing his pivot, Cardell lashed his big left fist into Fenray's face, feeling the solid shock ripple up his arm.

Head jerking, Fenray lurched backward, the gun exploding aimlessly into the air. He struck the upright post at the outer corner, with such impetus that it broke in the middle, brush and dirt from the ramada pouring down over him.

Sprawled on his shoulders and blowing blood in a scarlet spray, rolling and threshing in the dusty debris from above, Fenray was still gripping Cardell's gun until Choya Valdez leaned over and wrenched it out of his hand. Scrambling to his feet at last, Deak Fenray made a wobbling turn and staggered off in a splay-legged trot toward the barn and corral.

"That does it," Niles Terence said, drawing his right-hand gun. "That's one too many for him." Terence was leveling off to shoot Fenray in the back, when the

Sagebrush Sam Says:

Whenever you find yourself ridin' a cowhoss that ain't no good, there ain't but two ways out of it: either learn him or turn him aloose.

cool drawling voice of Steve Elrod froze him motionless.

"Hold on, Terence. You can't shoot a man down like that." Somehow, without seeming to stir a muscle, Elrod had thrown his Colt clear of leather and lined it on Niles Terence.

"But he was going to kill you!" Terence said, shaking his shapely dark head in wonder.

"He didn't, though," said Elrod. "Thanks to Cardell there. Shall we holster these irons?"

Niles Terence shrugged. "Why not?"

Kate Moran appeared in the doorway, gray-blue eyes anxious, arms spread to either side of the entrance, fine breasts lifted high under the soft flannel shirt.

"Nobody hurt," Terence told her. "No damage, Kate—except to the porch roof and that post. Your friend Cardell swings a heavy fist."

"I'll be riding along," Steve Elrod said. "It's a long ways to Pat Flanagan's Hog Eye layout. I'll tell Pat his cattle have a good new home here."

"Yeah, you do that," growled Hook Breason, forcing a grin.

"Won't you stay for supper, Steve?" inquired Kate.

"No, thank you, ma'am." Elrod shook his blond head. "Got to be making some time eastward. See you all later." With a lazy salute, he stepped lightly into saddle, and they watched him ride slowly out of the yard.

"You going to let him go, Niles?" demanded Breason, hands on his gun butts, jaws bulging with muscle. "You know what it means?"

"They'd be coming sooner or later anyway," Terence said.

"What we going to do then?" asked Hook Breason, still staring hungrily at Elrod's high rangy back.

Niles Terence smiled faintly and spread his hands. "Well, we can fight or we can run, boys. But right now we're going to eat some supper, if Kate'll get it ready for us."

Deak Fenray didn't show up for the evening meal. They were at the table when they heard the quickly receding beat of hoofbeats, and knew that Fenray was riding out. Hook Breason and Choya Valdez started to rise, but Terence motioned them back onto their packing-box chairs and to go on eating.

"Let him go. It's good riddance, boys."

BREASON was swinging his head like an enraged bull. "We could use that full share he's carrying, Niles," he protested.

"It's worth more'n that to get rid of him Hook," said Terence, laughing softly. "And he probably won't go beyond getting dead-drunk at Naylor's bar anyway. He hasn't got the guts to travel the Strip alone."

Cardell was thinking gloomily, If Fenray gets liquored-up at Naylor's, he'll no doubt make a few lecherous passes at that pretty little blonde Judy girl. I think maybe Choya and I'd better take a ride up that way this evening to make sure his foolishness don't go too far.

"When Kid Lonesome finds Pat Flanagan missing," said Breason, "he'll be right back here with a big posse."

"We don't have to be here waiting for them," Choya Valdez said.

"Sure won't be, if we got the brains we was born with," grumbled old Frank Hildner.

Terence laughed again. "What you boys worrying about? We've got twenty thousand square miles to run and hide in, without any law to fret us."

"Don't underestimate Steve Elrod, Niles," warned Kate Moran.

"I never underestimate anybody, Kate," said Terence. "Especially a man that can hold your interest and light up your eyes."

"If a woman of mine ever looked at a gazabo like that, I'd tear her arms off and beat her brains out with the bloody stumps," Hank Breason declared, half leering—half scowling.

Smiling sweetly, Kate remarked, "A woman of yours—if any—would look at anything else in the world, Hook. Just to rest her poor half-blind eyes."

CHAPTER V

One Down—Five to Go

RIDING upriver, with the sudden desert night dark and cooling and washed with starshine around them, Cardell and Valdez saw the lights of the trading post blooming ahead, with a warmth and cheer that was like the Naylor family itself. Choya Valdez was eager to see Judy again. She had been in his mind since that first day, and he hummed a lilting love song as they jogged along the rutted wagon road. Cardell was silent and troubled, aware of impending disaster and death, thinking of Kate Moran, whom they had left back there with Terence and Breason and Hildner.

There were no horses at Naylor's tie-rails, either front or back of the long rambling log structure, and no customers in the store or bar-room, they saw as they dismounted. Fenray must have ridden on.

Old Nails greeted them with his natural friendliness, white hair and chin whiskers gleaming in the lamplight.

"Yes, your friend was here, banged-up some and still bleeding a mite, but he bought some whisky and went along. Wanted to buy some guns, but I wouldn't sell him any. Told him I was all out. He had murder in his face, boys, and I wasn't putting any guns in his hands."

"A good thing, Nails," said Cardell. "He's a wild one, worse'n ever lately. We had to take his guns away from him."

They had a few leisurely drinks, and Choya Valdez politely inquired as to the welfare and whereabouts of the family in general and Judy in particular.

"She took a walk down by the creek, I believe," Naylor said, a slow smile crinkling his leathery cheeks. "She was a little put out today because Steve Elrod took a fancy to your Kate Moran."

"Would it be all right if I walked down there after her, Señor Nails?" asked Valdez, with his easy, charming smile.

"I wouldn't tell the other one where she was," Naylor said. "But I'll say Yes, to you. I think I can read men pretty good, after all these years."

"Thank you, señor," said Choya. "With a fine lady like your daughter I am always a gentleman. With the other kind—*quién sabe*? I won't be long. Leave a little whisky in the bottles, Card." Flashing his smile, Valdez walked out with fluid grace.

"I want to thank you for keeping Kate here last night, Nails," said Cardell.

"It was nothing," Naylor said. "We enjoyed her company. She's a nice young woman, but— Well, it's not my affair, but it surprises me to see a girl like her riding with men like them other three. I place you and the young Mexican and the old-timer in a different class."

"Thank you, Nails," said Cardell. "Your judgment is good—and not because it flatters me. There is a difference. We are split up, three on a side. And Kate has been too much under Terence's spell to know where she belongs."

Naylor nodded his white head. "I've known a lot of good men, outside of the law. Men like old Buff and Monty and Rawhide, for instance. We see all kinds of 'em in the Pakoon. Some real bad, some maybe driven to it, one way and another."

Outside the moon had risen above the eastern ramparts and the vast peak of Mt. Trumbull, and was gilding the stream as Choya Valdez neared the tree-bordered bank. A horse neighed and pawed the brush in a dark thicket, and the sounds of some kind of a struggle reached his ears. Drawing his right-hand gun, Valdez paced forward with a light, careful tread, breaking into a run when a low, choked feminine cry went up from the willows and alders before him. Deak Fenray must have doubled back and discovered Judy Naylor at the river!

Beneath a lance-leafed cottonwood, transformed to glittering silver by the moonbeams, Deak Fenray had forced the girl back over a boulder, crushing her

tight and straining greedily toward her ripe mouth and terrified face. Judy was writhing and struggling frantically against his embrace, her golden head flung back to avoid his kiss.

"Let her go and stand back, Deak!" ordered Valdez crisply, eyes like black liquid-fire, and fury flaming all through his slender body.

FENRAY twisted to look over his shoulder, teeth jagged between swollen, gashed lips, welted nose jutting like the beak of a carrion bird. Releasing the girl, he turned and stumbled away from the rock, spreading his open palms and panting:

"I ain't got a gun! Don't shoot me, Choya! Don't kill me without a chance. I'll ride out, Choya! I'll keep going this time."

Valdez uttered a snorting laugh, sheathing the gun and fumbling with his belt buckle.

"I'll give you a chance, Fenray," he said, teeth on edge. "I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

The belt and guns dropped to the ground. Deak Fenray charged at him instantly, a steel blade glimmering wickedly in his hand.

Judy tried to scream, her cry faint from exhaustion, as the two men collided in the leaf-patterned moonlight. Valdez caught the upthrusting wrist in his left hand, and ripped his right fist into Fenray's bruised face, his right knee rising to the man's groin. The knife flew clear in a brilliant arc, as Fenray rocked backward and doubled up with tearing anguish.

Valdez was in, catlike, striking swiftly with both hands, straightening Fenray up and beating him backward down the gradual slope toward the creek. Deak Fenray tottered on the brink, and Valdez lunged headlong, hooking a shoulder into Fenray's chest and driving him over backward.

They landed in the shallows, with Valdez on top and Fenray flattened against th rocky bed of the stream, splashing and rolling and floundering apart from the jarring impact. Valdez wallowed upright near midriver, the water up to his armpits and the current tugging at him.

Swimming and wading shoreward, he saw Fenray rear up in front of him, a good-sized boulder raised overhead. As the boulder came hurtling at him, Valdez flung himself backward and submerged, the heavy missile jolting his hip beneath the surface, its impetus lessened by the water.

Plunging toward shore again, Valdez dived flatly along the surface and grappled onto Fenray before Deak could regain his balance. Planting his boots on

the pebbled bottom, Valdez heaved and dragged Fenray out into greater depths, slugging and wrestling him down in under water. They lost contact once more, coming up gasping and spouting, to blunder into another sodden clinch, striking and clawing, kneeing and kicking, as they whirled about in the current.

Waterlogged and breathless, buffeted by boulders, they fell shoreward this time and emerged in shallower going. Valdez felt as if he weighed a ton, his arms and legs too heavy to move, but the sight of that vulture-face fired him with new strength and hatred.

Smashing at it, his blows feeling slow and ponderous but landing squarely, he knocked Fenray back and down. Valdez tripped and fell on top of him, locking a left-handed clutch onto Fenray's throat and clubbing his right fist into the grotesque ruins of that evil beaked face.

Deak Fenray was helpless now, sobbing and pleading pitifully, but there was no mercy for him left in Choya Valdez. Fastening both hands on Fenray's neck, Valdez ground the man's head into the sand and stones of the river bed, holding him under water until his frenzied struggles ceased and there was no life left in the battered hulk of Deak Fenray.

Then Fenray's body was gone, drifting downstream toward the distant Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, and Choya Valdez was somehow upright again, staggering weakly in to the shore and up the sloping bank.

There, as he was about to fall full length, Judy Naylor caught him in her strong young arms, lowering his drenched and exhausted form tenderly to earth. She held him there in an effort to warm and comfort and restore him, for Judy too had been remembering, and wanting to see the slim, handsome, smiling Choya Valdez again.

BACK in the barroom, Cardell was growing restless, impatient, and tired of drinking alone. Old Nails had stepped out back for something, leaving the rear door ajar. Cardell was about ready to move out front and yell for Choya, when he heard slow muffled hoofbeats and then voices in the back yard, Naylor's raised unnaturally high, as if in warning:

"Long ways from Hog Eye, ain't you, Tonk?"

Alerted at once, Cardell listened intently for the reply.

"There'll be a lot more along in a couple days, Nails. Hope you got plenty whisky on hand."

"What's bringing 'em out of the Parashaunt into the Pakoon, Tonk?"

"Old Pat Flanagan's horse came home

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

MAKES EVERY PIPE A PIPE OF PEACE!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF. AND NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE.

It costs no more to get the Best!

without him. Which means Pat's lying dead or hurt bad somewheres. They're scouring the range for him. We lost some cattle too, Nails. Their tracks run this way, into the Pakoon, so I come on ahead."

"Buffalo wouldn't hit the Hog Eye, Tonk," said Naylor.

"I ain't looking for Buff—except maybe as a last resort. You got some new people hereabouts, Nails?"

"Well, there is one new party."

"Where can I find 'em?"

"You ain't going against six gunslingers alone, Tonk?" protested Naylor.

"Never mind that. I want to know where they are."

"They're down on the Baker spread," Naylor told him. "The Bakers pulled out awhile back. Had trouble keeping their beef, I reckon."

By this time Cardell had edged his way almost to the front door. The Hog Eye rider said something about needing a drink, and Cardell slipped quietly out, untying his own horse and Choya's, and leading them across the trail toward the creek. But the man called Tonk must have heard something or sensed his presence, for the front door slammed open, spilling light across the yard, and Tonk stepped outside.

Moving from the rectangle of light into shadowy darkness he called:

"Hey, you! What's your hurry? Hold up there and lemme have a look at you, brother."

Cardell halted and turned, reins in his left hand. "Who the hell are you?"

"Tonk Keeler. Foreman of the Hog Eye spread. And I want to know who you are and what you're doing here, mister."

"I stopped taking orders from foremen a long ways back," Cardell said. "And I never was fond of answering questions from strangers. Don't bother me any more, Hog Eye."

"You'll either talk or reach," Tonk Keeler said harshly. "Which'll it be now?"

Cardell raised his voice in disgust. "Nails, what's the matter with this damn fool? I don't want to have to shoot him, but he's prodding me pretty hard."

Naylor came to a stand in the doorway. "Lay off, Tonk, till you know what you're doing and why. Your whisky's waiting in here. Don't go off half-cocked. Maybe Pat's home safe in bed, for all you know."

"Pat Flanagan's dead," Tonk Keeler stated. "I know it. And I got a hunch this feller knows more about it than I do. You're called, mister. Start talking or slap leather!"

Cardell let the reins fall, leaving the trained horses ground-tied, and sidled clear of them.

"Wish you could call him off, Nails, but I reckon he's too set. You're witness that this was forced on me."

Cardell stood in full bright moonlight, while Keeler was a blurred bulk in the shadow of the building. But Card could see him well enough, now that his eyes had adjusted themselves.

"You ready, outlaw?" rasped Keeler, crouching a bit, with elbows out wide, fingers spread and taloned.

"Waiting," Cardell said, standing solid and calm and relaxed, in spite of twitching thigh muscles and the chill prickle of spine and scalp.

TONK KEELER was one of those speed merchants, who banked everything on getting home the initial shot. His first one, fired before his barrel rose to level, kicked gravel over Cardell's boots. His second, loosed before he had pulled down from the recoil, brushed Cardell's hatbrim in passing.

Cardell's draw was a shade slower, but smooth and steady, the gun rising in an even arc. Cardell thumbed his hammer forward with the barrel on a slight downward slant, the flame spearing out bright red-orange as the Colt jumped in his big hand.

Tonk Keeler spun unbalanced on one leg, the other smashed and whipped out from under him by the .44 slug, his own gun blasting at the ground once more as he hopped awkwardly on the good leg. He pitched sliding and twisting into the trampled dirt before the hitch-rack.

Naylor came out and wrested the pistol

from Keeler's hand. "Thanks, Card," Nails said. For not shooting to kill."

Cardell turned back to the horses and gathered up the reins. Judy Naylor and Valdez came running up from the creek, and Cardell noted that Choya had been in swimming with his clothes on.

"The Hog Eye foreman," he explained, motioning toward the man Naylor was bending over. "Let's hit the leather."

Valdez smiled and squeezed Judy's firm-fleshed shoulders and swung into his saddle. She watched wide-eyed as they lined out of the yard, and galloped southward along the stream, the dust clouding up silvery behind them.

Slowing the pace then, they exchanged stories, briefly and quickly. Cardell smiled ironically, listening to the description of the watery brawl in the river.

"Niles and Hook wouldn't like it much, Choya," he said, "if they knew you let Fenray float off dead with all that money on him."

Valdez swore softly and fluently in Spanish. "I forgot all about that, Card. Never gave it a single thought. All I could think of was killing that buzzard-faced one."

"Well, we've probably got more money now than we'll ever use," Cardell said musingly. "But Niles and Hook'd most

likely follow the creek all the way into the Colorado if they knew Deak's money-belt was drifting down it."

"We going to tell them about Deak? And the Parashaunt posse?"

"I don't know yet, Choya," said Cardell, deep in thought. "I don't know what to tell 'em—if anything."

"This outfit's going to pieces, Card," said Valdez. "We ought to break loose on our own, while we can."

Cardell nodded gravely. "We ought to, Choya. But I hate to leave old Frank and Kate—with them."

CHAPTER VI

Two More Shares

IN THE ranch house, Kate Moran was repairing a torn, disjointed rag doll left behind by the Baker children, exercising scrupulous care with needle and thread and scissors in the lamplight. Old Frank Hildner dozed on the sagging rawhide couch, while Niles Terence and Hook Breason sat smoking and talking by the opposite wall.

Terence glanced at Kate with mild scorn. "Give a woman something simple to do and she's happy as a cow in clover. Something that keeps her busy without requiring any brains or skill. Sweeping, mopping, sewing, washing dishes or clothes."

"Maybe she likes baby dolls, Niles," said Breason. "She seemed to like that baby-faced Kid Lonesome considerable."

Terence shrugged indifferently. "Cardell isn't baby-faced, and she likes *him*."

"That rumhound's probably drunker than a goat by now. And that half-breed's likely trying to get the Naylor gal up in the hayloft." Breason scowled and rubbed his heavy, brutal jaws. "Kind of hope they bring Deak back with 'em though. We're going to need his guns, Niles."

"Not to mention his money-belt," Terence said, laughing. "That's what you're really thinking about, isn't it, Hook?"

"No, it ain't," Breason growled. "But them other three, they never was real outlaws. You can't trust 'em, Niles. And if Fenray's gone, there's only two of us." He looked over to see if Hildner was sleeping or faking it.

"We can handle them," Niles Terence said. "Hildner's day is gone, and Valdez is just a hell-raising kid. Nate Cardell's a good man, but too soft-hearted for a gunfighter. Always shooting for the arms and legs and shoulders. It'll get him killed some day, that soft streak."

"Well, you shouldn't've let Fenray

get away. Or sent that drunk and the Mex up to Naylor's tonight."

"You want to take over, Hook?" asked Terence, cool and gentle.

"Hell fire, don't hand me that!" Hook Breason stood up and stretched, kicking his packing case against the log wall. "We ought to have a guard out. I'm going to wake up the old geezer." Crossing the room he shook Hildner roughly awake, and hoisted him into a sitting posture. "Get up, old man. Out front and stand watch now. It's too damn early to be snoozing."

Frank Hildner rose groaning, stiff and slow, picked up his rifle, and shuffled wearily out the front door. Kate eyed Breason with distaste, and refused to look at Terence when he tried to catch her eye.

Terence reflected, She's getting out of hand, and so's Hook. And Deak was way out of line. Must be I'm losing my grip or something. That's what comes of dragging a woman along. You lose that hard sharp edge and the respect of the men under you.

Aloud he said, "If Fenray does come back we'll have to kill him. Or let the posse take him for murdering Pat Flanagan."

"So what, Niles?" said Breason. "Either way we'll have his share to split up. And maybe some other shares, before we're done."

Terence surveyed the big man with contempt. Breason had the insatiable greed of a ruthless individual raised in the direst poverty. No matter how much he acquired, he would always be hungry for more.

Suddenly the whole thing went sour for Niles Terence. An almost physical sickness stirred within him, a rancid bitterness welling up into his throat.

Hook Breason was watching the doorway out of the corner of his eye.

"The old man's listening out there," he whispered hoarsely, and strode abruptly outside in under the drooping ramada.

Frank Hildner was sliding away from the entrance, rifle in hand, when Breason caught his shoulders and slammed him back on the logs.

"What the hell you snooping around for, you old crock?" snarled Breason. "Trying to hear something you can tell Cardell and Valdez?"

PINNING Hildner there with a huge left paw, Breason slapped his right hand back and forth across the gray-whiskered face, bringing tears from the faded sunken eyes, blood from the nose and mouth.

"Leave him alone, Hook!" Niles Terence said sharply, from the doorway. "You're getting as bad as Deak Fenray."

Breason let go and stepped back with evident reluctance. Old Hildner tried to line and fire his rifle right-handed, like a revolver, but Breason gunwhipped him savagely. As Hildner grunted and sagged to his knees, Breason struck again at the bowed gray head, beating the old-timer face down in the packed dirt.

Niles Terence had flipped a gun clear, and the muzzle of it bored deep into Breason's brawny back as he crouched to club still another blow at that loose-sprawled bleeding gray skull.

"You've killed him already," Terence said, with loathing and disgust. "Holster that iron and stand back, before I blow you apart!"

Breason straightened, sheathed his gun, and stepped away. "It was him or me, Niles. He was trying to —"

"Did you have to hit that hard?" demanded Terence. "Can't you handle an old man without killing him, smashing his head in like an eggshell?" Terence knelt lithely beside the crumpled figure of Frank Hildner. "Sure, he's dead all right! The first one would've done it. Why don't you clout me while I'm down here, Hook? Then you'd have two more shares for yourself. And you could probably take Kate's away from her. If Cardell and Valdez didn't catch you at it!"

Terence stood up slowly and stared at Breason with unutterable scorn. Shrinking, Hook Breason backed away from him, wagging his shaggy head and spreading

his oversized hands.

"Wh-what we going to tell them—Cardell and the Mexican?"

"You figure it out," Terence said icily. "You did it, Hook. Now you can crawl out of it—perhaps."

"I ain't afraid of them two," Breason blustered.

"All right, tell 'em you killed the old man then. Challenge them both, Hook. You can only die once."

Breason hesitated. "Ain't you going to side me, Niles?"

Terence laughed at him. "What do you think? How long since you needed help to burn down a rummy and a half-breed?"

"We might as well get the money off him," mumbled Breason.

"You get it. That's what you wanted anyway. That's why you broke his head."

"I'm going to lug him out back of the sheds and hide him. I'll bring his money-belt in, Niles."

"Maybe you'd better keep on going with it," Terence said. "Saddle up and ride out, Hook."

"No, Niles, no!" panted Breason, lifting Hildner's body over one massive shoulder. "I'll be right back, Niles."

"Don't hurry," Terrence said. "It smells better without you around."

He turned back inside the house, as Breason lumbered off toward the outbuildings with his ghastly burden. Kate looked up from the doll she was working on, and asked:

"What happened out there, Niles?"

"Hook killed old Frank," he said dully. "With a gun-barrel."

Kate's fine face showed shock and horror. "You stood by and let him do it? How rotten can you get?"

"I couldn't stop him—without shooting him."

"What's wrong with shooting a beast like that?" Kate demanded.

"Maybe I should have," Terence admitted wearily. "But old Frank made a try

[*Turn page*]

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with his rifle. It was self-defense—in a way. And Hook and I have cut a lot of capers together, Kate."

"I've got a hunch you've cut your last one," she said coldly.

"You're no doubt right," Niles Terence said, kneeling beside her and reaching out with his arms. But Kate shivered and turned away from him, as if his touch was too detestable to contemplate.

APPROACHING the ranch, Cardell and Valdez reined up in the shadow of a clump of Joshua trees outside the yard, in time to see Hook Breason emerge from the barn with a spade in his hand, and disappear behind the row of dilapidated lean-to sheds. They exchanged puzzled looks, and Cardell felt a chilled sinking premonition.

"You cover the house, Choya," he said in a low voice. "I'll go see whether Hook's digging a treasure cache or a grave."

"A grave for old Frank," murmured Valdez. "I can feel it, Card, in the bottom of my stomach."

They dismounted and parted behind the barn, Valdez circling toward the log house while Cardell swung around toward the rear of the sheds. From the back corner of the first lean-to, Nate Cardell saw Frank Hildner's body lying halfway down the row. The top of his gray head looked as if it had been crushed down over his gaunt gray-bearded face. His clothes were disordered, his money-belt and wallet tossed aside, and Hook Breason had just started digging with the spade.

Cardell's guns were still in their low-slung holsters. As much as he wanted to, Card couldn't shoot the monstrous Breason in the back. But Breason had to die, and Cardell wanted him to see who was killing him.

"Drop that, Hook, and grab for your guns!" Cardell said.

Breason dropped the spade and stood rigid, back still to Cardell.

"I ain't got a chance," he complained. "You got me covered."

"You don't deserve a chance, but you're getting one. I haven't touched a gun yet, Hook. Draw and turn around—and die!"

Hook Breason's double draw was like lightning, his guns flaring and roaring as he came wheeling around, one slug chewing wood out of the corner at Cardell's left cheek, the other shredding his right sleeve near the shoulder. Cardell's motion was smooth, even and flawless, his right hand sweeping the heavy Colt up level and lined, and bursting aflame at the precise moment. Dust puffed whitely from Breason's shirt as the bullet jarred him backward, arms jerking high and guns spouting fire at the starry moonbright heavens.

Cardell threw down from the kickup and slammed another shot into that gross, twitching bulk. Hook Breason tripped backward over Hildner's body, twisted and caught himself and rammed head-on into the rear wall of the shed. Heaving back from it, he landed on his shoulder-blades, squirmed over onto his belly, kicked feebly and was still, his brute-face in the weeds.

Still ablaze with fury and hatred, Cardell walked over and fired a final shot into Breason's wide, muscular back. Then stooping and tearing away blood-soaked clothing, he stripped off the man's money-belt and dug out his wallet. Picking up Frank Hildner's belt and purse, Cardell stood for a long hushed instant, looking down at the old man's battered gray head and crimsoned face.

Choya Valdez met him between the house and the sheds.

Cardell said, "He was burying Frank. There's two of them to put under now. Get the horses, Choya, but don't unsaddle. Reckon we'll be riding tonight."

Kate Moran and Niles Terence were waiting outside the lamplit doorway of the ranch house. Cardell handed Terence the money-belts and wallets.

"I gave Hook an even break, Niles. He's out there with Frank. Choya got Deak up at Naylor's, but his body went down the river, money and all."

"I should have shot Hook myself," Niles Terence said. "But I couldn't quite do it. We'd been through too much together—

Well, there's three men of us left—and Kate."

"And a posse coming out of the Parashaunt," said Cardell. "We'd better pull out of here right away."

Terence nodded. "We will, Card. We'll move out tonight."

He was entering the house, when Kate ran forward and threw her arms around Nate Cardell, crying softly, "Thank the Lord you're all right, Card!"

Terence watched for a brief space in silence, then went on inside without a word or a gesture. Kate and Cardell were still in an embrace when Valdez crossed from the barn to join them under the ramada.

Within the log walls, Niles Terence stood staring absently at the leather-covered wealth in his strong, graceful hand. He had the money, but he had lost the girl and the leadership of the band—or what was left of it now. Fenray and Hildner and Breason were dead, and time was running out for the rest of them. It didn't seem to matter. Nothing mattered any more. Niles Terence was sick and tired of running and hiding and fighting and killing, sick of the whole vile bloody business.

Sitting down at the crude table, he reached for the whisky bottle and took a long deep drink. Then he emptied the belts and wallets, and started dividing the money into four equal shares. For all it meant to Niles Terence, he might as well have been counting sticks or stones or matches.

CHAPTER VII

A Man for All That

FOUR fugitives lay at the top of the mountain pass to which Buffalo and his partners had directed them—how many days ago? They were sheltered by a natural barrier of boulders, shaded by gnarled stunted pines and silvery rippling aspens. Below, a steep narrow corridor dropped between sheer jagged rock walls, and all around reared barren towering peaks and vast naked domes.

As Buffalo had said, one man could hold this passage against a regiment, as long as his guns and ammunition held out. But if the four of them remained there much longer they'd be trapped, for the pursuit was already circling around the cliffs and heights to close in eventually from the rear. And part of the posse was down there in front of them, hidden by the first bend in that deep defile.

They had been on the run for a week or more—none of them was quite sure just how long—and it showed in hollow eyes and dirty, sweating faces, drawn and gaunted to the bone structure. Their clothes hung in filthy tatters. Their horses, in the shady basin behind them, drooped in exhaustion. They had a fortune with them, and it was nothing but an extra galling burden for themselves and the jaded mounts.

Sometimes they were inclined to think that Deak Fenray and old Frank Hildner and big Hook Breason had been lucky, to die before they came to this.

Steve Elrod was leading the detachment down in the corridor, and they knew now that he was some kind of a lawman, a Federal marshal or an Arizona Ranger perhaps. One thing Fenray had been right about, as Niles Terence remarked whimsically.

"One man can hold this position as well as all of us can," Cardell said. "Our only chance is to leave one man here, while the others make their break. If we wait much longer they'll bottle us all up here. If we move now, three of us ought to get away."

"I'll stay," Valdez said cheerfully.

"No," said Cardell. "You're young, Choya. You've got a lot to live for. And you've got Judy Naylor waiting for you."

"And you, Card, have Kate Moran," Terence said drily.

"Have I, Niles?"

"It looks that way. She's finished with me, that's certain."

Cardell said, "The only fair way is to draw lots for who stays. Us three men."

"Right, Card," agreed Valdez.

"Wrong, Card," said Kate Moran. "There's only one way to do this, and I'm calling the turn." She had risen and drawn a gun, and she was holding it on Terence. "Niles is going to stay here, if I have to shoot him through both legs to make sure of it. Stand back, Card! Don't move, Choya! I mean what I'm saying."

Niles Terence laughed softly. "You're quite right, Kate. I was going to volunteer anyway. You don't have to hold that gun on me."

"Why should you stay, any more than me?" Cardell demanded.

"Because I got you into this," Terence said quietly. "Because I lost control of Fenray and Breason—and Kate—after we hit the Strip. And because I'm the only real bad one left in this bunch. Let's not argue the point, Card. I'm staying here. My mind was made up before Kate pulled that gun on me."

"Well, I don't like it much," Cardell said. "I still think we ought to draw for it, Niles."

"Why draw?" Terence said. "There's nothing left for me but this. And I owe this much to Kate, and you two boys also. Get ready to move out now."

Cardell glanced at Kate, and she was still holding the cocked gun.

"You heard the man," she said, and he *is* a man again now. Niles is holding the pass, and we're riding west into Nevada. On your feet, boys."

CARDELL and Valdez got up, slow and uncertain and ill-at-ease, but Niles Terence was smiling as he removed his money-belt and slowly handed it to Kate.

"I won't be needing this, folks," he said, tossing a heavy wallet at Cardell. "Money won't buy anything up here. You three go straight and make a good life for yourselves. You weren't cut out for this business anyway— Now get the hell out of here, will you?"

Cardell and Valdez saluted silently and walked away toward the horses, with Kate lingering behind for a last, hesitant moment.

"Good-by, Niles," she said, her voice faltering a little.

"So long, Kate," said Niles Terence. "And put up that damn gun! I'm not going to run away, or throw down on you from behind. I'm staying because I want to stay, and not because you got the drop on me, baby."

Kate turned quickly to hide the tears in her blue-gray eyes, and ran blindly into the bowl where the horses were tethered. Niles Terence stared after them, trying in vain to swallow that aching lump in his throat. After watching them out of sight, he rechecked his three six-guns and two carbines, washed a swig of whisky down with canteen water, and turned toward the rock-walled passage below his barricade. . . .

They rode for about half an hour in silence, and Cardell knew they were going to make it now—thanks to Niles Terence. He marveled once more at how Terence managed to look clean and groomed after a week on the run. He'd been unshaven, sweating and dirty, yet somehow shining with that inner elegance that transcended trail dust and powder grime and beard stubble. Quite a man, Niles Terence. Bandit and killer or whatever the world might call him, he was all man.

Kate Moran pulled up all of a sudden. "I'm going back. I can't leave him alone like that."

"Don't you want to live, Kate?" asked Cardell quietly.

"Why, yes, but—"

"Niles doesn't," Cardell went on. "He hasn't cared about living for some time, I reckon. And he'd rather be alone back there, Kate."

"All right, Card," she said brokenly. "I'll go on—with you. Anywhere with you, Card."

Soon afterward the shooting started in that corridor behind them, and they could see it all in their minds. The posse trying

to move up, and Niles Terence driving them back down the pass, firing coolly and calmly, smiling down the blued steel barrels as he aimed and squeezed off his shots, gray eyes narrowed against the sun and the powder-reek.

"He'll give them hell," Choya Valdez said, with solemn pride.

"You're damn right he will, Choya," said Cardell, his throat tight and choked. "They won't get far against Niles Terence."

Kate nodded her coppery chestnut head vigorously, the tears streaming open and unashamed down her lovely bronzed cheeks now.

"Niles will hold them all right," she murmured, with proud satisfaction. "Niles will hold that passage against all the legions of the devil. But he—he'll die there, in the end."

"He'll never die, Kate," said Cardell simply. "As long as we live and remember him."

"And our children too, Card," said Kate, smiling through her tears.

"And grandchildren and great grandchildren," added Valdez, with quiet reverence. "Señor Niles Terence is going to live a very long life indeed."

BUT one thing still bothered Cardell. They had too much money. Too much for comfort and safety. They ought to ship some of it back to the authorities, if and when they got out of these mountains. Keep just enough to give them a good new start in life, a chance to make an honest living. That much they had earned. The rest, the surplus, they didn't want or need.

Cardell thought Kate and Choya would agree with him on this. It would ease their consciences, square them with the board, and make them all feel better and cleaner.

The gunfire crackled on in the distant background of the heights. Niles Terence was making his last fight a good one, holding that mountain pass. ●●●

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By GEORGE H. ROULSTON

"Daddy," she cried, "I don't want him to die!"

Mission for a Stranger

The rider who sought Paul Darsey's hospitality that day, was he a hunted man—or the hunter?

ALL this day it had been warm, terribly warm, but toward evening the sky began to gather gray shreds and it wove them into a soggy gray blanket. The wind began to whisper up the gulley and whine softly around the corners of the ranch buildings. It snatched the dry leaves still clinging to the trees and rattled them across the ground. Before nightfall, there would be the first winter snow.

It was almost sunset when I cut three fast horses out of the remuda and hid

them in the barn next to the road. I was walking across the ranch yard to the house when I saw the horse and rider top the hill; hardly more than a black speck against a rapidly darkening sky. For the first time in my life I felt a growing fear from watching a stranger approach my place. Always before I had made them welcome.

Marion, my wife, was standing in the kitchen doorway, watching him too, and *I* gave her a quiet signal. Seconds later she hurried out the front door with a small hook rug across her arm and she flung it angrily across the front yard fence. When she returned to the house she gave me a sharp thoughtful look to let me know that this business wasn't all finished yet.

"Better set another place at the table," I called to her as she went into the house.

The rider was still paused on top of the hill and he appeared to be giving my place a careful survey—as if he were looking for one ranch in particular. Then he turned his horse and began a careful descent down the steep slope. My ranch buildings were scattered along a natural bench that was halfway up on the east hill. In between the two long hills, the creek had cut a twisted V-slash, and further up the slope, on this side, was the well.

I watched him water his horse at the creek. The stranger sat tall in his saddle, a young man, lean and hard-muscled. I could see the dark blotch on his hip that was a six-gun and in the deliberate way that he rode I received the impression that he was riding toward me expecting trouble. It was plain that he was no ordinary cowhand just drifting through, riding the winter grub line. He had come to my ranch with a purpose.

Luetta, my daughter, was down at the well drawing water. The stranger rode up, and without dismounting, picked up the buckets from the well curbing. He started up the path, carrying a bucket in each hand, Luetta walking beside his horse. I felt my body stiffen when I heard her easy laughter break into the night's stillness.

She's twenty and old enough to judge and care for herself; but it still gave me a certain inward fear to watch the way she had taken up so freely with this stranger. Maybe it was the way she had let Drake Hunt hold her so close at the schoolhouse dance last week. Maybe times have changed, I thought, but I'd better have a talk with her, anyway.

"Evening," the stranger said, when he put the buckets down on the table outside the kitchen porch and waited for me to give him an invitation to dismount.

"Light and eat," I said, moving up to them. There were still traces of gay laughter in Luetta's face at something this stranger had said. But I took a good look at the stranger's face and there was no laughter there. His face was a stern mask and there were deep lines around his mouth. The way a man's face will look when there is grim work just ahead for him. His eyes, gray as steel dust, moved around the ranch yard and touched each building with a careful study.

"Thanks," he answered, sliding from his saddle. "I'm—er—Bud Lewis and I'm glad to know you folks." He said all this without pleasure.

"Paul Darsey," I told him. "You can put your horse in the north corral there and you'll find feed in that barn there."

I WATCHED him lead his horse away. Ever since we'd been here, riders had stopped by as they drifted through. It was the custom of the country and they expected to be put up for the night, and I was glad to have them. All kinds of men had stopped here and I studied each one. Men on the dodge had been just as welcome as those who stood on the other side of the badge. But most of them had just been drifting cowboys riding the grub line. Before tonight, I'd made them all welcome.

After they'd gone, I would mull over everything I knew about the man until I could draw some satisfactory conclusion about him. What he was; where he was going and where he had come from. When your nearest neighbor is thirty miles away

and you seldom see him, someone coming in and bringing fresh gossip and the latest news, no matter who it is, is welcome. Their coming is something that livens up the month's routine.

Some would come and talk about the places they'd been to; the various cow outfits that they had worked for. Those were the ones I envied, the ones who had done a lot of traveling. Marion and I were married when I was eighteen and I didn't get a chance to do much drifting. Then there were others; the ones that sat so they could watch out the window while they ate, and then would slip quietly away long before dawn. Maybe, months later, when I went to town, someone would ask me.

"Did you see a feller riding a Running W roan come through here? They hung him over in Marysville for robbing the stage."

That was the way it went. Their horses and the way they rode them; the way they dressed and the way they acted told me more about them than perhaps anything they could ever say. The winter days are short and the nights are long and I have a lot of time to sit beside the kitchen stove and think and wonder about the men that came here riding the winter grub line.

I studied Bud Lewis as he unsaddled and took care of his horse. He was too well dressed to be just a common cowhand and his saddle was an expensive one, not built for heavy roping or hard cow work. He wasn't jumpy and he didn't have the haunted look that men do who ride the dark trails. But Bud Lewis wasn't his real name. I could tell that by the way he had hesitated when he said it.

"Is he going to stay all night?" Luetta's voice held a teasing ring and her eyes were shining with a gay light that I didn't like one bit.

"You know he is," I answered sharply. "Go in and help your mother with supper."

I took another look at the road and at the rug hung on the fence, hoping that Bud Lewis wouldn't see it or else wouldn't know what it meant. Luetta darted into the house, slamming the kitchen door the way she had always done since she was a small girl. I heard her footsteps clatter up the stairs and Marion's patient call, "Luetta, come help with supper." And from her room I heard Luetta's faint, "In a minute,"

Bud Lewis put his saddle in the barn and stopped in the open doorway to roll a cigarette; another excuse to stand there and make a careful survey of each building. I knew he had stayed in the corral long enough to read the brands on each horse there. The horses I had ridden were in the south barn on the other side of the house.

He started toward me and stopped short in surprise when his roving glance touched the rug on the fence. He gave me a quick look and smiled; then he let that unreadable mask drop across his face again and he came up and stood beside me. I could feel the fear inside of me growing, a tight knot deep in my stomach, and now I wished I hadn't been so quick in accepting some people's offers.

We heard the sound of hoofs beating against the frost-bound road and Bud turned toward it with a quick motion that was like the cutting of a knife, his body taut and his hand dropping to his gun.

I felt my own body stiffen, and the cold air going through my clothing fanned the hot sweat that ran down my ribs. The rider came nearer, still hidden in the twilight.

My breath eased and my body relaxed.

"Drake Hunt," I said, feeling better. "I know his horse's gallop. He's calling on Luetta."

Bud Lewis turned toward me; his hand still rested on his gun and his lips were set in an odd twisted expression. "Were you expecting someone else?" he asked curtly.

I felt my own eyes waver beneath his searching glance. He was a little taller than I am and he had a way of tipping his head down at me. He had come here for a purpose and he didn't trust me. It was plain in his actions; in every move-

ment of his lithe and powerful body.

HE SCRAPED the mud from his fancy boots onto the flat rock that served for a door step and he stepped up on the back porch. I kept my eyes toward the horse sounds coming down the road and I said as quietly as I could, "Stranger, I allow no guns to be taken into the house. There's a nail by the door that you can hang your gunbelt on."

He gave me a curt glance, hesitated a moment, and unstrapped his gunbelt. He had the light motions and slender iron muscles that reminded me of a bobcat. His eyes took in each detail and they seemed to have a way of drawing a lot from small scattered details. He was acting the same way that other man hunters did who had passed through here. He stepped back into the sheltering darkness of the porch so that Drake Hunt wouldn't see him when he rode up. All these things added up.

Drake Hunt galloped through the front gate and brought the sorrel to a plunging stop directly in front of me, grinning when I had to dodge away to keep from being run down. The horse, steaming from the hard run, pawed the ground, reared and twisted; worked to a high frenzy by Hunt's cruel bit and spurs. I wished now that I had never sold him that horse; he'd never get another one from me, no matter how bad I needed the money.

Drake gave me that insolent smile of his. "Tell Luetta I'm back," he said curtly and then galloped his horse across the lot to the corral. He turned the steaming animal loose without walking him first to cool him off. It would soon be another good horse ruined by him and I dreaded to think how he would treat Luetta when she married him. Yet Drake had his good points and he was regarded by some around here as a good catch for any woman. Maybe marriage would tame him down and he would outgrow his wild streak. Anyway he had made money from his ranch during the past two years while the rest of us around here just broke even. Somehow he was always lucky in finding a buyer who would pay him higher than market prices. It was something none of us could figure out.

Bud Lewis was watching Drake with a narrowed-eyed interest. Drake came striding across the yard with that slight swagger of his. As usual he was wearing his fancy pearl-handled revolvers. These guns weren't the ones that had killed the Lazy T puncher last year. A short-barrelled thirty-eight hidden in Drake's coat pocket had done that. The puncher had made the mistake of watching Drake's gunbelt instead of his hands and Drake had fired, left-handed through the cloth.

Drake didn't see Bud Lewis until he stepped up onto the porch. He drew back in surprise, his footsteps faltered, and the color washed from his face.

"Drake," I said, pulling off my boots with a boot jack. "This is Bud Lewis. Drake Hunt."

They didn't shake hands. They both murmured a "howdy" and stood there sizing each other up in the same way two young bulls do that are getting ready to fight. Drake got control of himself and began to swagger again. I opened the kitchen door and ushered them inside.

Marion had lit the lamp on the table and it's yellow glow flickered in a small circle, leaving the far corners of the room blotched with shifting shadows. The frost gathered its white coat on the window panes and it was like a thousand glittering diamonds. I tossed my boots behind the stove and got a drink out of the water bucket.

The room was filled with the warm smells of fresh baked bread, roasted beef and cooking vegetables, and overriding all these was the pungent odor of coffee.

Drake watched Marion carry a plateful of roast beef to the table and he said with a grin, "I guess cattle is getting so cheap that a man can afford to eat his own beef for a change".

I turned on him with a flash, my temper rising. Maybe he meant it as a joke, but I didn't like the sound of it. "How would you know?" I flung back. "Did you ever try it?"

Drake's face went livid and he laughed. A strained laugh with his teeth showing white against his dark face. He didn't answer. It was the remark of a man ill at ease. Worried over something and not knowing what to say to hide that worry.

I never did like Drake Hunt and I never would. Drake was the kind that made enemies easily and there were a lot of tales told about him. But if Luetta wanted to marry him, that was her business and I wouldn't stand in her way.

I'd have given anything in the world if she wouldn't marry him. Maybe it was because I didn't like Drake and I thought she was too good for him. Maybe it was because she was our only child and we didn't think that any man was really good enough for her.

Sagebrush Sam Says:

If you save your money till you're old—you can have all the things only a young feller can enjoy.

STILL angry I tossed my coat down on a chair and hung my hat on a nail. Bud Lewis hung his hat beside mine, stepping in such a way that he didn't turn his back to Drake. Drake followed every movement he made and he tried to ride his dislike or fear, which ever it was, of Bud Lewis.

Marion was busy carrying dishes to the table and she stopped long enough to give Bud Lewis a thoughtful glance and to cover up the ugly hole that Drake and I had ripped in the conversation.

"We're glad to have you with us, Mr. Lewis," she said. "Have you come far?"

He never took his eyes off Drake. "Yes'm," he answered. "Quite a ways. You folks certainly have a nice place—"

He cut it off and he turned his head toward the stairs. Luetta came down wearing the blue Sunday dress that her mother had just finished making for her, and she had her long hair combed back and fixed with the fancy combs that I had brought for her mother long years ago. Her hair is brown, a light brown like Marion's used to be before it went gray, and it caught up and held the lamplight's dazzle. She's a slender girl, with a mischievous gleam in her eyes like Marion's have when she is in a good humor. She came down the steps with all the grace, dignity and beauty that a queen is supposed to have. Watching her, I felt a dry lump grow in my throat. It was like watching Marion on our wedding day; only it was a different feeling.

Bud Lewis watched her with open admiration, forgetting everything else. He stood there in the center of the room, motionless, straight and tall.

Marion frowned at him and then at me, and Drake watched him with a deadly open hatred. I watched Luetta with mixed emotions. Proud that I had a beautiful daughter and that she was wanted by men. I watched her fall in love as she came down the steps and I watched a man that I had only known for less than an hour fall in love with her.

I tried to realize that she was a grown woman now, with all the hopes and desires that a vibrant woman has. That all the time she was growing up we had been preparing her for this moment—for a man to take her from us and for them to build their lives together.

She crossed the room to her mother's side, and still flushed and pleased with the flurry she had created, she began to help with supper.

I stepped out onto the back porch to

the narrow cupboard where I keep my things and took down my bottle. It was starting to snow, dainty flakes that evaporated as soon as they hit the still-warm earth. My hands shook as I poured myself a drink. I'm forty and gray at the temples; yet the years that have passed since the day I fell in love with Marion and took her from her parents seem to have been only quick months.

I took another drink. I asked myself why this Bud Lewis came here tonight and I could find no satisfactory answer. I wondered if he were a lawman after the Galt boys. But what was worse was the look I saw on Drake's face when Luetta came down the steps, her eyes on Bud Lewis alone, and I was afraid for that ending.

I had seen that same look on Drake's face before when he killed a man. He had walked toward him with those fancy guns glittering in the sunlight and one hand in his pocket. The man had watched the guns . . . . That look had been on Drake's face as he watched Luetta coming down the stairs. He was gathering up his nerve, getting ready to kill. He'd never stand back and let Bud Lewis take Luetta from him. He wasn't that kind of a man. Yet I had the feeling that whatever it was between them ran deeper than Luetta. It was something else, something I didn't know about.

I took a bite of dill hanging there to kill my breath and I went back inside. Still shaking and still in a cold sweat, I didn't know whether to like this Bud Lewis or what. Luetta had only been a minute coming down those stairs. Yet that minute had seemed like hours, and in that minute the destiny of every person in the room had been changed.

They were all seated at the table. Marion gave me a sharp glance; she knew I had been drinking, and it only added to her slowly rising anger. Her pouting was just about over and then her anger would break into the open.

Drake and Bud faced each other across the table and Luetta was sitting beside Bud. On her face was a look of happiness that I hoped would never leave her and yet I was afraid for her. I sat down, bowed my head and said the blessing.

Drake filled his plate and, looking directly across at Bud, said in slow measured words, "I was in Wellsville today and I heard that the Galt boys robbed the Savannah bank yesterday morning. They're supposed to be heading this way." He paused, still looking at Bud, then added, "They could pass through here."

I saw Marion's hands tremble and the troubled look on her face. This was the first word we had had.

BUD returned Drake's steady gaze and he answered very quietly. "I came from the west. From Salinas. I'm a cattle buyer there."

Drake flinched and his fork slid from his fingers and clattered against his plate. Something struck me as funny. Drake had just sold a load of cattle there, yet he hadn't said one word about it. Always before he would be bragging about how much he had got for them.

Luetta, unaware of the rising tension or the hate between the two men, said, "Why, you should know Drake then. He just returned from there today."

Bud looked at him with a twisted expression. The way a man will do when he has found an answer to a question.

"Oh," he said.

Drake waved his fork in a nervous gesture. "Why—why I didn't get to go to Salinas. I went to Hallsville. Didn't buy anything, though."

Bud Lewis lifted his head and his eyes bored into Drake's blue ones. Across the stillness and deadly quiet, he said very calmly and very slowly, "There's ladies present and we'll 'tend to this later."

Drake's face froze. Then he smiled. "Suit yourself." He glanced around the table and rose from his chair. "I'll see you folks later," he said and walked out of the house.

I heard Luetta's rapid breathing and saw her breast rise and fall in a worried anxiety. Bud and I watched him through the window. He crossed the yard with long

quick strides, hurrying through the snow to the barn and he failed to come out of it again. He was waiting there in the shelter of the barn's darkness for Bud.

There was no sound in the room except for the clock's metal clicks and the roar of the cook stove. Bud sat there, his hands trembling and his knuckles showing white as he gripped his coffee cup.

I heard the sound of hoofbeats muffled against the dry snow. It was the Galt boys coming after the fresh horses and supplies that I had agreed to sell them. But I didn't move. I had felt the gnawing fear of the law and strangers when Bud Lewis rode up to my place. I wanted no more of it. Never before had I taken outlaw money and now I never would. The rug on the fence was an old warning signal for them to stay away; that it wasn't safe to come here.

The lamp began smoking and Marion lifted the chimney off and began to trim the wick, concentrating on it as if it were the most important thing in the world and there was no one else in the room with her.

The Galt boys paused a minute and rode on without stopping, the hoofbeats slowing fading into the silence. Marion adjusted the wick and put the chimney back on the lamp, and I saw the look of relief that was in her eyes. That meant more to me than anything else in this world. We'd find some way to get along without that kind of money. We always had before.

Bud set his coffee cup down and he looked at Luetta, and his words were for her alone. Marion and I were an intrusion in their privacy.

"My name is really Bud Murphy," he told her. "Lewis was my mother's maiden name. My father and I were cattle buyers over in Salinas before he was killed. Two days ago a man riding a Bar DR sorrel, your brand, rode out with him to look at a herd that we had for sale. Like all other commission men my father carried quite a bit of cash with him and this man shot him in the back and robbed him. It hasn't been the first time this happened to some buyer. No one saw who my father left town with but a train man got a good look at the horse and he remembered the brand!"

Bud turned his head toward me. "I traced the brand to you and I thought it was you until Drake showed up on the sorrel he was riding." His voice trailed off to a husky whisper. "The rest you know."

I nodded. "Drake carries a thirty-eight in his coat pocket. Watch his hands. Remember that."

Bud's chair squeaked as he pushed it back and rose to go. "I'll remember."

He hesitated a moment as if he were tempted to back out or ask for help. I stood up and I wanted to say something. I wanted to do something, but I was helpless. This was his fight and he'd have to face Drake Hunt alone. He had no right to ask for help. We both understood that and there was nothing I could do.

Law and order was something that was forty miles away; over a day's ride from here. What law there was was only on each man's hip.

HE WALKED out the door and I saw tears in Luetta's eyes. I heard his boots make scaping sounds on the porch as he buckled on his guns and hesitated a moment and then he stepped off the porch.

I watched him though the window as he walked through the white curtain toward the barn. With a wild sob Luetta sprang from her chair and started toward the door, but I grabbed her and pulled her back. She buried her head against my chest, spotting my blue shirt with her tears, and her body was racked with deep sobs.

"Daddy!" she cried, looking up at me. "I—I don't want him to die. I—I love him."

I couldn't think of anything to say. I just stood there and held her tight and felt her body quiver in my arms. Two shots smashed against the silence; harsh flat sounds that had no depth or echo. A long miunte coasted and a final third

shot sounded.

Luetta raised her head from my chest and she started away. I turned her into Marion's arms and she was like a child that was tired and sleepy. "Wait here," I said, "I'll go see."

I went over to the rocking chair beside the stove and pulled my boots on. Marion looked across Luetta's shoulder at me and for the first time since I had made the deal with the Galt boys, she spoke to me. "Paul, be careful."

I opened the door and said, "I will, Mother."

I took my six-gun out of my cupboard on the porch and I started toward the barn, not knowing what to expect. I could see no sign of life and there was no sound except my boots creaking against the dry snow.

I was almost there when I saw Bud come out of the barn and stand in the open doorway. The gun hung limp in his hand and I saw that he wasn't hurt. I went on past him and he followed me back inside, standing there while I searched the wall for a lantern, lit it, and held it high above my head.

Drake Hunt lay twisted across a bale of hay, his life blood slowly pumping from his body and his sightless glazed eyes staring up at the ceiling. I turned the lantern out and hung it carefully back on the wall.

We stood in the doorway. silent in our own thoughts, and letting the giant snow flakes cling to our clothing and hair. I had the feeling that my father had when I married and left home. Like any father feels when he knows he soon will have to give up his daughter.

Bud tried to roll a cigarette, but his hands were shaking too much and he gave it up. "Would you object, sir," he said, "if I was to be riding this way quite often?"

I was silent for a moment, watching the snow fall. "No, I wouldn't" I answered.

That was all I could say and it was all that needed to be said for now. Without speaking, we walked to the house together. ●●●

COME AND GET IT!

PEOPLE who read about ranching and mining and prospecting sometimes get a hint of what people ate, but seldom learn much about it. You always hear about sourdough biscuits, but recipes for making them are scarce. With Western clothing getting popular all over the country, it might be well for some of the weekend Westerners to know how to throw together a batch of sourdough biscuits. Here's how you can do it:

Make a starter by grating up about two tablespoons of Irish potato, and stir that into about two cups of dry flour. Then dribble water into this mixture until it has the consistency of a batter. Put this into a fruit jar or pitcher and set it in a warm place to ferment for 24 hours or so. It will swell up with gas.

Then when you are ready to make your biscuits the next day, put about as much flour and salt in a pan as you will need for the batch of biscuits, and then work this sourdough starter into it until you have a dryish dough. Roll this out on a floured bread board, cut out your biscuits, dip them in grease and put them in a pan for oven baking, or in the bottom of a Dutch oven for camp baking, or on a griddle for quick indoor baking.

They have a taste all their own, and you'll get the habit of liking them, particularly with barbecue.

—Walter Beard.

Crowby let loose with a violent kick at the stool

TROUBLE RANGE

By CY KEES

For sheer orneriness,

only one critter could

match Old Man Crowby:

his tail-switchin' cow

IT'S those little, innocent things you do that gets you into the biggest heaps of trouble. Let me, Dink Heath, tell you that. And believe me, I'm one what knows. Take for instance the time I tied the knot in the milk cow's tail.

I was riding the grub line then, and getting to be a trifle gaunt. I might've been

looking for a little excitement too, but mostly I wanted some good solid chuck. Anyhow, if trouble it had to be, I wanted something that suited my fifty odd years of age. Not anything like I ran into regarding a shotgun, a sowheaded nester, and his beautiful daughter.

It was late afternoon when it started, and I was looking hard for a place to bed down. I'd just reined my crowbait down a quiet green valley when I saw that milk cow.

It was one of those old broken-down cows with a sorrowful Annie look on its face. I slowed down behind her. Looking like she'd just lost her oldest friend, she shuffled along the cow trail in a shuffling gait. Ribs jagged out all over her, but still she had a low-slung potbelly. And she had a long, scraggly tail.

That tail dragged clear to the ground and caught every snag and piece of brush she passed. Every time it caught, it flipped straight out behind her and dragged her down to a still slower pace. Then she'd look around with big sad brown eyes, as if to say:

"Say, ain't a lady got troubles enough without you always got to be yankin' at her tail?" It was that look in her eyes that roused my sympathy. I decided I'd help her.

So, without any trouble or speed needed, I pulled up alongside her and caught her tail. It was a real armful, and I figured it must've been growing a long time. Without hurting her, I took the long, straggly ends and started tying a knot.

It took a long time because there was lots of tail. When I got through, she had a knot on the end of it the size of a big head of cabbage. And a solid knot too. But she didn't seem to notice. She flounced along, the knot swingin' to and fro behind her. I grinned—then spotted the spread in the flat below.

From the size and looks of it, I guessed it to be a nester outfit. I smacked my lips. Whatever it was, I figured, it was a good place to see what they served for supper. Then I saw a man stride out of the house and move cross the yard.

Slipping into brush close to the trail, I watched him. He was big and square-lookin', and even from that distance, he appeared to be knotheaded. He had a stool in one hand and a bucket in the other.

Milking time, I thought, and smacked my lips again. All they needed with that milk was a big steak, half a bushel of potatoes and a gallon of coffee, and I'd be happy again. The cow reached the flat below and ambled toward the man.

Rearing back, he gave her a couple of quick, welcoming kicks, and then he spotted the tail. Scratching his head, he circled behind her and studied it. Finally, he shook his fist up the trail from where the cow had come, right at where I was hiding.

The air got blue around his head, and even at that distance, I made out a flock of high velocity cuss words. Squatting on the stool, he started milking. He'd been at it quite a while when I saw something that made me hold my breath.

The big knot on the tail was swinging back and forth slow, like the pendulum on a granddaddy clock!

Guess the flies were bad, and that cow was getting powerful anxious to take a swat at them. The man milked on, not seeming to know about that dangerous weapon so near his head. And him with no hat on. He was hunched over, milking with one hand when it happened.

THE knot kind of flipped up in the air and switched around. It thwacked him a mean lick, square again his ear. Right square. That cow couldn't have done better if she'd had sights on her back and aimed it. He let out a wild roar, and I didn't have to strain a bit to hear his cussing then.

Getting up, he kicked the stool a quarter of a mile, time it quit rolling. Then he up and dumped the milk he had over the cow's head. Still grumbling and rumbling, he walked back to the house. I debated whether it'd still be safe to go down and try to spear a meal.

In the end, my belly won the argument over my better judgment. Wiping nervous

sweat from my forehead, I forked my crowbait again and rode down. The cow sniffed at the milk when I rode past, like she was a little rankled that he'd spill it after all the trouble she had to make it. I neared the house yard, and the man charged out of the screen door.

He had a shotgun crooked in his arm, and I started to wish I'd stayed clear away. He was short, squat, and he had mean green eyes. His head was as square as a cracker box, and you could almost see pigheadedness leaking out his ears. He waved the shotgun with one hand.

"If you're one of those fence-cuttin', land-hoggin', tail-knottin' son of a witchin' cowpuncher, get out or take buckshot!" he yelled. I reined around to run, but I glanced back.

"Never did punch cows," I said, lyin' like a lawyer. "Name's Dink Heath, and I'm a farmer from up north." He mulled that over awhile and lowered the shotgun.

"You know anything about that knot in my cow's tail?" he asked, his green eyes boiling with suspicion.

"Not me, nosirree," I said, quick. "Happened to see your place here when I was ridin' by, and I thought you might favor an old farmer with a bait of grub." His face clouded up when I mentioned the eats, like as if he didn't care to give anything away.

"Light down then," he grumbled. "My name's Crowby." He looked at me kind of sly then. "I don't 'spect you mind doing a little work for your supper?"

"Not at all," I said, shuddering inside. "You got any *little* odd chores to be finished up, I'll be glad to help." His shotgun was still pointed in my general direction, so I tried to sound soothing. "Havin' a little trouble with your neighbors?"

"A little trouble?" he barked. "I never had so consarned much grief in my life as I've had in this hellhole. Johnny Edwards and his Lazy E gunman have cut my fences, robbed my water, run off my stock, and now the silly idjits tie a knot—"

"They did not!"

At the sound of the new voice, I swiveled around in my saddle. She flitted through the kitchen screen door and came running across the yard. And, man, what a beauty she was!

She was kind of tall and kind of slim, and she moved smooth and easy, like a young doe. Her hair was curly brown, and right then, her dark eyes blazed fire at Crowby. You could see she was a little scared, but she stood right up to him.

"You just make that all up because you know Johnny likes me," she accused, and her lips started to quiver.

"I suppose I made that up about the knot in my cow's tail too," Crowby snarled. "And then let it fetch me a lick in the head that liked to scramble my brains!"

"Just because the knot's there isn't any sign Johnny did it," she argued.

Crowby sneered. "That's it, stick up for him against your own father," he rasped. "I suppose you'll say that knot grew on the end of her tail natural like. She was just grazin' along, you'll say, and all at once it kind of rolled up and—"

"No, but . . ." She looked at me then, her brown eyes searching me. I tried to look innocent, but I knew I looked as guilty as an Indian agent caught runnin' a still. For her sake, I would've admitted it, but Crowby had his shotgun too handy. And his left ear was still beet red from the lick he'd taken alongside the head.

"But what?" Crowby barked, glaring at her.

"Nothing," she said. Her lips were quivering more and more, and finally she started bawling.

That made me feel all soft inside, and I figured to help her get this Johnny guy, if she really wanted him. But right then, there wasn't much I could do to help. Crowby scowled at her.

"No need of snifflin' around me," he said. "This stranger—this Dink Heath is going to have supper with us, so you see you get it ready. Meantime, we got some work to do."

She went back into the cabin, and he turned to me. "That was my daughter, Jenny," he said, like he was apologizing for her. "I can't for the life of me figure

out where she got all her stubbornness."

I took a long look at his big square head and decided that was a likely place. But I didn't say anything. I followed him to the woodshed, and then I started earnin' my supper.

AND what I mean, I earned it. First I cut about seventeen cords of wood. Each chunk was full of knots that fought back on every stroke of the dull axe. I no more than got through with that, and Crowby handed me a hoe. We headed for the spud patch.

When we finished hoeing a couple hundred miles of those, my belly was so empty, I could've put a longhorn steer in it. And without trimmin' the tips off the horns. Staggering a little, I put the hoe away and headed for the kitchen.

"You ain't through yet," Crowby barked. "You still got the hogs to slop." I pulled up, winded and starting to get a little proddy.

"I did enough work already to feed a roundup crew," I snapped. "Now let's get to the grub."

"No slop the hogs—no supper," he said, as nasty as a sidewinder. He fingered his double-barreled shotgun again. I felt like getting my horse and telling him to keep his damned grub. But I was too weak from hunger to do that. Besides, now I wanted a chance to get back at him.

So I slopped the hogs. When I came up to the house after that, I had my own .45 Colt loose in my holster and ready to go into action. If Crowby would've told me to do anything, even to wash my face before we went to the table, I would've hauled iron. But seeing the look in my eyes, he broke trail to the kitchen and food at last.

All the while we ate, I felt that Jenny gal's big dark eyes on me. She didn't eat much. Looking sad and forlorn, she just picked at her grub, and I tried to keep my eyes away from her.

It made me feel guilty to think I'd made things harder for her. Having to live with a pighead like Crowby must've been tough enough, I thought, without me making things worse. Crowby didn't seem to notice that she was blue about her boyfriend.

Not seeming to notice her at all, he slopped off his plate in big chomping gobs. I matched him share for share until all the dishes were slicked out. He grunted to his feet and hunted out his shotgun again.

"Better keep an eye on the place in case Johnny Edwards comes prowlin' around," he grumbled. All the time he watched Jenny out of the corners of those mean green eyes of his. I had an idea he was only saying it to nag her. It burned me, but I can be ugly too when I have to be. So I grinned.

"Careful you don't get too near that cow in the dark," I said, needlin' him. "If she swipes you between the eyes like she did alongside the head, we'll have to carry you back."

"You shut up with that smart lip!" Crowby snarled. "When I catch up with Edwards, he'll trim that tail, and he'll trim it neat." He glared around the room. "I'm one what, when somebody does me wrong, I never rest easy of a night till she's all squared up!" He stomped out into the dark then, and I was alone with her.

It got awful quiet. A mean, waiting kind of quiet. I sneaked a glance at Jenny, and her dark eyes locked with mine. But there was something like a twinkle in them now.

"Mr. Dink Heath, I can see you don't know my dad very well," she said with a sigh. "If you did, you'd never make remarks like that."

"Or tie a knot in his cow's tail," I said, as bold as brass. Thinking about it, I laughed. "You should've seen the way he stomped around when that knot larruped him on the ear." Jenny laughed too, but she sobered fast.

"I hope he doesn't start trouble with Johnny Edwards over it," she said. "Somehow, I knew right away you'd done it. But if Dad does, he'll still blame it on Johnny because . . ." Her tanned skin flushed to a deeper color. "You see, we're planning to be married."

"Your old man knows it then?" I asked.

Jenny shook her head. "I've never had the nerve to tell him. But he knows I like Johnny. And that's why he's always thinking up lies to tell about Johnny. The Lazy E has never bothered us, but Dad always pretends they do." She gazed at me kind of accusing like. "Now you had to come along and make it worse."

"I was just tryin' to help the cow out," I mumbled. I watched while she cleared off the table. "Why don't you sneak off and get married, if you both want to?"

"If I can possibly do it, I want to make them friends," Jenny said quietly. "You know, after all, he's my dad."

"Yeah," I mumbled. For all the misery he caused her, she still loved the old pighead. More than ever then, I wanted to help her out. Thinking about it, I smiled.

"Maybe we can get our two heads together and think of a way to make everything come out all right," I said. Jenny stared at me for a long time, and suddenly, her dark eyes glowed.

"Gee, I hope so," she said. It seemed to cheer her that she had someone on her side. "Somehow I feel like you *are* going to be able to help me."

About that time, Crowby stomped in, an ugly scowl twisting his face. He muttered around for a while about as to how Johnny Edwards was too much of a yellow-backed coward to show his face when you went hunting for him. I noticed Jenny looking bleaker by the second, so I figured I'd relieve the tension for her.

"Maybe he sleeps nights, 'stead of prowling around looking for trouble," I said, nasty as a bucket of axle grease. Growling, Crowby whirled on me.

"So that's the thanks I get for lettin' you hog all my grub, eh?" he said, looking kind of hurt. "I suppose I don't have enough expense feedin' my family 'thout I got to feed a lot of stray tramps like you too. Then get a lot of smart yap for payment."

I THOUGHT of all the wood I'd split for the grub, not to mention the acres of spuds I'd hoed. But most of all, I thought of Jenny wanting to get married.

"You give your daughter a chance to get married," I snapped, "and all you'll have left to feed is your own big greasy gut!"

Crowby quieted, and his greedy green eyes showed signs of some thinking. I guess it struck him for the first time how he could get by cheaper if Jenny wasn't in the house. But finally he shook his head.

"I see that Jenny earns what she gets around here," he rasped. "Which is more than I can say for some strays we take in." He jerked his head toward the door. "You can sleep in the barn if you want to, but there won't be any breakfast."

As mad as a twice-kicked dog, I went out into the dark. I took my bedroll from the back of my saddle and crawled up into the hayloft. If it hadn't been that my crowbait needed a good rest, I might've pulled out right then. Still I was too powerful curious to see how Jenny would make out to want to leave. In about five minutes, I heard rustling downstairs.

"Sh-h-h, Dink!" It was Jenny. She came up the ladder and stuck her head up in the loft. When she spotted me in the moonlight, she shushed me again with a finger over her lips. So I didn't make a sound.

"I forgot to tell you, Johnny's coming over in the morning to take me riding," she whispered. "What'll I do?"

I thought it over. "Why don't you meet him before he gets here?"

"Dad won't let me out of his sight," she said sadly. "If I try to sneak away, he'll follow me, and then there'll be trouble for certain."

It was a puzzler all right. I got an idea, and I grinned. "I'll sneak out tonight and tie a brick to that cow's tail," I said. "About the first time she takes a switch at a fly while he's milking her, you won't have to worry about him for a couple weeks."

Jenny sighed, like she was about out of patience with me.

"I guess I'll just have to quit going with Johnny for a while," she said in a sad voice, and she went back down the ladder.

I called after her, but she didn't come back. In a few seconds, I heard the screen door brush shut, and I knew she'd given up hope that I could help her.

That made me feel bad because I was sure enough on her side. And she had been darn nice about not blabbing on me when she knew it was me that caused her latest trouble. I lay awake a long time in the blackness of the loft, trying to think of a way to help her out. I still hadn't thought of any way to do it when I fell asleep.

I woke after sunup, and I heard Crowby prowling around in the barn down below. Right away, I thought of what he'd said about there being no breakfast for me. I stretched, still loggy from the grub I'd cached away the night before, and I didn't care. Crowby went back into the house. I sneaked down and saddled my crowbait, ready to go.

But I was undecided, and I waited around, wondering if I should tell Crowby about putting the knot in his cow's tail. If I could catch him away from his shotgun . . .

Hoofbeats sounded over the cool morning air, and my heart pounded. That would be Johnny Edwards, I thought, and he'd have no idea he'd be stickin' his head into a hornet's nest. I sidled through the barn door, intent on heading him off and warning him. But Crowby was already stomping across the house yard, his green eyes bulging with mad.

"Find the gate, find the gate!" he kept yelling, shaking his fist at the rider. The rider reined in, kind of hesitating.

He was tall in the saddle and dressed like a puncher. He was curly-haired, and his hat was tipped far back on his head. Right away, I knew he was Johnny Edwards. Slow and easy, a big lopsided grin curved his mouth.

"Did the bedbugs give you a bad night?" he asked in a soft drawl. "Or are you always this damned crabby of a mornin'?"

"You keep gettin' yappy with me, and I'll show you some real crabbiness!" Crowby bellered. "Whatever you want, it ain't here, so get out!" The screen door slammed and Jenny glided out into the yard.

STARING at her, Johnny dragged off his hat. "Oh, yes it is," he said, real soft and slow. "There she is, right there." His eyes were twinkling, but his smile was gentle and loving. "Jenny, will you go riding with me—please?"

"You blamed right she won't," Crowby snarled, before Jenny had a chance to answer. "She's never going to go out with you again. That's your payment for tyin' that knot in my cow's tail."

"For what?" Johnny asked, his brow furrowed, while he scratched his head in wonderment.

"You know good and well what I mean," Crowby barked. "You—"

"Someone tied a big knot in our cow's tail," Jenny cut in, with a sidelong look at me. "The cow slapped Dad in the head with it, and he thinks you did it."

"Well, I'll just bet him ten bucks I didn't," Johnny said, sobering fast. "You know, I'm gettin' weary being accused of a lot of things I never did. Or even thought of."

"That ten bucks is called," Crowby snapped, and his green eyes got greedy again. "You prove you didn't or fork the money over. Either that or Jenny doesn't leave this place."

[*Turn page*]

THE LAST SHOT

IT ISN'T true that the last shot of the Civil War was fired in Texas. Actually, it banged away in the Pacific Ocean, after being fired by the Confederate cruiser Shenandoah at a Northern ship on June 28, 1865. What's responsible for the false belief is the fact that the last engagement between Federal and Confederate troops took place in the Lone Star State. The place was Palmetto Ranch near Brownsville, and the date, May 13, 1865.

"Well . . ." Johnny started, and his voice trailed off.

An idea hit me and I walked toward Crowby. He didn't have his shotgun now, and I wasn't scared of him when he didn't have it, no matter how blocky he was.

"Pay him the ten bucks," I snapped at Crowby. "I was the one that tied that knot."

With a growl low in his throat, he whirled on me.

"Why, you dirty, sneakin' skunk!" he whined, and he looked like he wanted to bawl. "Take a man's free grub, and then turn on him! Bite the generous hand that feeds you, you dirty whelp!"

Still on his horse, Johnny grinned. "Quit cryin' and give me ten bucks," he said. "That'll teach you to be free with your mouth."

Crowby didn't even look at him. He looked at me, and I could see his green eyes glittering, trying to think of a way to get out of paying that money, and to get back at me. Crowby thought for a long time, his big square head cocked in deep thought.

Then, sudden like, his green eyes got a kind of glow, like he'd thought of a good one. His mouth twisted in a big smirk, and he turned back toward Johnny.

"You'd like to court my Jenny, wouldn't you?" he said, as sly as a weasel.

"That isn't all," Johnny said, gazing at Jenny. "I want to marry her."

Crowby stiffened, and his jaw jutted out a little farther. Jenny flushed and looked down at the ground. I guess Crowby thought of that ten bucks again, and how he wanted to get back at me, because he swallowed hard and didn't say anything against it.

"I guess if Jenny wants to, I'll have to let her," he said finally. Then he smirked again. " 'Course if we're going to be in the same family, there's a little matter I'd like you to help me out on."

"Sure thing," Johnny said right away, and he winked at Jenny.

"First of all, naturally we can kind of forget about that ten bucks," Crowby said, and Johnny nodded. Then Crowby stared at me, long and ugly. "And you're going to help me make this tramp trim my cow's tail," he rasped, his green eyes glittering with meanness. "I'm one what, where there's a wrong done me, I never rest easy of a night till she's all squared up!"

It rankled me that I always had to be getting in a spot where Crowby was getting the best of me. First all the work I had to do for one meal. Then his ordering me out of the house with no breakfast. And now, I had to trim his cow's tail, when all I'd tied the knot for in the first place was to help the cow out.

I closed my right hand over my .45, ready to tell them both to go to hell and make what they wanted out of it. But then I glanced at Jenny. Her brown eyes were big and begging me not to make any trouble over it. And she had been so nice about not blabbing on me when she knew all the time it was me. Anyhow, I couldn't refuse that look in her eyes.

"I don't reckon—"

"Wait," I said, cutting Johnny off before he could refuse to help Crowby. Long as I was going to cut the tail anyhow, there was no sense in his losing the benefit of it. "Get me a scissors and I'll trim that tail."

Grinning like a cat full of canaries, Crowby dug out a big sheep shears. I started toward the cow, and he walked right along behind me, making smart remarks every step of the way. I would've given ten years of what short life I've got left to get back at him. Just before we got to the cow, I chanced to turn and saw Johnny and Jenny riding off together. They both waved, and I waved back.

IT MADE me happy, just to see Jenny happy. We walked up to the cow, and I cut the knot off first thing.

But Crowby wasn't satisfied with that. Plain feeding his pride now, he made me trim it all off neat and right down to the hide. When it was all trimmed to about a slick four feet stub, he waved at the barn where I had my horse.

"I'm going in the cabin now and get my milk bucket and my shotgun," he rasped. "When I come out, if you're in sight, I'm

going to give you both barrels!"

"Any lead you throw at me, you'll get back—with interest," I snapped, fingering my .45.

Crowby didn't answer. He walked to the house, and I went for the crowbait. He'd be just pigheaded enough to start shooting, I thought, even if he knew he'd get his gut full of lead a minute later.

I rode back up the hill to where I'd first seen the cow. I reined in there and watched to see if he would come out.

Sure enough, in a few minutes, he came out, the bucket in one hand and the shotgun in the other. I sidled back into the brush, and I guess he didn't notice me because he went right to the cow.

It still rankled me that I'd let him get the best of me, but there wasn't much I could do now to get back at him unless I wanted to start a big row, and I didn't. He squatted on the stool and started milking. He was at it quite a while when I saw something that made me hold my breath.

All the padding had been trimmed off that cow's tail, and what was left was as hard and as easy swingin' as a bullwhip. And it was swingin' back and forth like the pendulum on a clock, ready to start striking any time.

The cow was getting ugly anxious to switch away at the flies. Crowby's big thick head was close to it, just near enough it seemed to me to be right in range. Maybe he thought he had his tail trouble whipped now because he didn't notice it. He went right on milking.

Then, as stiff as a pick handle, the tail whipped around and warped him a slashing, wicked lick right alongside the head. Crowby saved himself from toppling off the stool, but the bucket tipped over and the milk seeped into the ground.

With a wild, cussing roar, Crowby righted himself. He kicked the bucket with his left foot and the cow with his right. Then he dove for his shotgun and let drive both barrels, square in my direction.

Before I could dodge for cover, I heard the shot spitting the tops of the trees around me. Crowby was out of ammunition then. He threw his shotgun on the ground and crouched there, shaking his fist at me. Me, I did what any brave, self-respectin' puncher would do in the same place.

I stood right there and thumbed my nose at him. ●●●

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A NOVELET

The Man From

There was a gun in the Kid's back, but who could know that? To Calico Creek he was a mad-dog killer, target for every man's lead!

CHAPTER I

Two Bad Men

THERE was a lump in the Durango Kid's throat as he topped the first ridge and turned his tall figure in the saddle to look back. The flying pace of his tall bay never changed as he took a last look at the man he would always remember as his friend, whom he had known from childhood in this same wild Montana country just above the Wyoming line.

He was down there on the porch of the old jail, and even from the distance he was like a towering old statue tilted back against the door. Gunsmoke still hung in the breathless morning air. Empty cartridge shells were at his feet. His warm rifle was still at his side, gripped as it had

Calico Creek

By TOM ROAN

The sudden turn dumped the old man out of the saddle, down to the rocks far below

been as he was firing his last shot. His faded blue eyes still looked down the long, dusty street where heat waves shimmered between the false-fronted buildings.

It was a picture so clear that the Durango Kid would remember every detail of it for the rest of his life. Old Trigger Dan Ringo had given his last hellfire and lightning show. And everyone would admit it was the best show Trigger Dan had ever staged, after nearly forty years as sheriff of Calico Creek.

In the same breathless mid-August heat, the shock of the unexpected fight still gripped the town. People were keeping indoors, with doors bolted and barred as

if fearing another wild outbreak of gunfire, yelling men, snorting horses, and thunderous pounding of hooves.

There were men back there in the hushed street who would never rise and fight again. Dust hung in the air at the hitch-rack in front of the little red brick bank and over the old wagon bridge. Another little dust cloud hung in front of the Trail Herd Saloon, and under the dust clouds sprawled the limp figures of men in black masks. Six-shooters and rifles had been dropped or thrown right and left as the lone figure on the porch of the old stone jail had pumped his unerring loads of death into the raiders.

Across the old bridge was more dust—a wavering banner left by panicky horses racing away from their dying riders and stampeding down the valley, away from the gunfire, the yells and curses of fighting men, and the whine and slap of bullets.

IT WAS the end of what had looked to the citizens of Calico Creek town like an attempt to rob the bank. Seven men had hit town in a rush, the sudden hell of their blazing, roaring gunfire throwing terror into everybody in sight.

Six of those badmen were there yet. Five were in front of the bank. The sixth was half-hidden under the hitch-rack in front of the Trail Herd Saloon. Apparently only one of the gang had made his escape. A reeling figure on a tall black mare, he had plunged into the alleyway just below the bank, his mount taking him away as a racing streak.

When Calico Creekers came out of their daze enough to realize just what had happened, they would know that it had actually been a twelve-man gang to hit the town, for no one had thought of riders wheeling up behind the bank. They would also learn that the bank *had* been robbed, and that the four men and a young woman who had been inside had been locked in the air-tight vault. Six men who had finished the job were fleeing now toward the crags of the Devil Drums walling the east side of the valley. And eighty thousand dollars of the bank's money rode in canvas bags with two of those men.

With two men riding ahead of him and three bringing up the rear, the Durango Kid had no chance to look back again until they were high on the rugged slope of the Devil Drums, their masks removed. Here behind a thick screen of low trees on a bench he could see the entire valley below. In the distance, Calico Creek seemed to be boiling over with excitement.

People were running, a surging mob around the front of the jail. Armed horsemen were tearing out of town, heading down the valley toward the settling streak of dust left by the fleeing horses that had been ridden by the six men dead in the street.

Except for Pink Dalton, a big, fair-haired youth of twenty, the men here with the Kid had come through the job without a scratch. Even Pink was riding straighter in his saddle now, longer having to hold on to the horn and his mare's long black mane. The Kid saw that he was still pale, though, and his lips were grimly compressed, for Pink had let a bullet catch up with him back there, and blood dripped from his right arm.

Old Two-gun Doc Dalton, Pink's father and the leader of the gang, would be waiting and watching for them now from the tall rocks just above the timberline. Having once been a horse doctor in this country until he had killed two men while robbing that same bank down there years ago, Two-gun Doc did not dare chance being recognized within a thousand miles of Calico Creek.

Though the Durango Kid had been born in the shadow of the towering peaks and snow-capped crags of these Rocky Mountains, no one here would recognize him by that name, for he had not taken it when he had left for Mexico seven years ago, when he'd been eighteen. But he was sure that old Jim Cook, the cashier in that bank down there had recognized his face—he had been the only one not wearing a mask—and if Cook ever got out of that air-tight vault alive he would be telling every man in sight that Young Sam Bronson, son of the notorious Bullet-hole Sam, had been

one of the five robbers who had rushed through the back door of the bank.

Jim Cook would not know that the firing pins had been filed off the hammers of Young Sam Bronson's six-shooters, and that the man behind him had been keeping him covered, and had orders to shoot him down if he said one word or gave a single sign of being anything but a member of the outlaw gang.

THAT had been the way Two-gun Doc Dalton had wanted it.

He had once been the bosom friend of Bullet-hole Sam Bronson. Friendship had turned to hatred when he'd blamed Bullet-hole Sam for deliberately selling him a loco horse that had killed his only daughter. Many believe that Doc Dalton was responsible for Bullet-hole Sam's death at the hands of supposed horse and cattle thieves in the Big Wind Canyon country west of Calico Creek. One man who had openly accused Dalton had been Trigger Dan Ringo.

For three days now the Durango Kid had been held prisoner by this deadly gang, watched night and day since he had fallen into their hands at his lonely campfire in the hills forty miles away. Now he had made up his mind to play out the game with them. No man could argue with bull-headed old Two-gun Doc, but the Durango Kid was determined to trail with Doc's bunch and hope for his chance.

"Damn!" Pink Dalton, suddenly doubling forward, grabbed his saddle-horn with both hands, his ruddy face going white. "I'm—sick!"

The Kid spurred up, catching him by his uninjured arm, bracing him in the saddle. Bull Jackson, the big outlaw riding just behind them, had dropped a quick hand to his six-shooter. Beauty Devine, the ugliest man the Kid had ever seen, six-foot-six and skeleton-thin, and who was in the lead, had instantly turned, a dark blue six-shooter filling his talonlike right hand. Deeply sunken black eyes stared for a moment, then he swung back straight in his saddle.

Old Doc had brought Beauty Devine down this little-known trail last night, showing him every foot of the way and planning everything for today's holdup. Pink Dalton alone had not obeyed orders. A show-off, Pink had decided to lead the six men selected to storm the bank in old-fashioned pistol-popping Western style from the front, to attract all attention while the others entered the bank from the rear.

So much blood would not have been spilled if old Doc's orders had been followed. Pink Dalton would have to take the blame when they faced the old man.

And he was there waiting when they reached the timberline—a little, dried-up old figure in shabby brown, a battered old derby perched on the back of his corn-colored head, his tall Midnight horse grazing behind him.

"We got the money, but Pink's hit!" Beauty Devine announced, and swung out of saddle. "Damn it, he insisted on leading the bunch up the street."

"And six of the boys didn't get away!" The old man came forward, blue eyes bright as new buttons. "They didn't have much sense, anyhow. Won't be missed. Leaves more money for the rest of us. I watched through my telescope—slip Pink out of that saddle and let me look him over! He always was a damned smart-aleck!"

Gray-bearded old Rice Fiddler, who had brought up the rear, rode his dapple gray closer, looking back down the slope.

"Seems like they're beginning to get a little sense in their noggins back there in town," he observed. "I see about a thirty-man gang heading out as if they'd hit our trail. Better do whatever's to be done here fast, Doc."

Pink was on the ground, his father bending over him pulling up his leather jacket and shirt and hunting his wound. For the moment the Durango Kid seemed forgotten, but he knew he wasn't. Art Drum and the deadly Bull Jackson, two short, dark-bearded men who might have passed for brothers were watching him, hands not far from their weapons.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to have

a damned doctor!" Old man Dalton looked up, face tight, his son's back and shoulders bared. And now it could be seen that a small, high-powered bullet had passed through the upper part of the body and on through the flesh of the arm. "Pink's bleeding inside, and that ain't a damned bit good!"

BEAUTY DEVINE was staring. "Well, ain't you a doctor?"

"I ain't one to handle this!" The old man gave the shirt and jacket a downward pull, and got to his feet. "All we can do for now is to help him back in his saddle and sorter hold him there till we get him to old Doc Waterbury on Little Cat Creek pronto."

"And in the meantime," Rice Fiddler said with a frown, "I reckon we'll tell that gang behind us just to set down and wait for us to get Pink fixed up, then they can come on! Damn it, Two-gun, I told you to keep that young fool here with you. He got the others killed, and now you want to pitch us to a posse to save his hide!"

"I'm running this show, Rice!" Old Doc Dalton's voice was the low grind of a rattlesnake's buzz, his eyes were like polished tips of blue bullets, and his gnarled thumbs were hooked over the buckles of his gunbelts. "Times you have too much damned lip. You feel you'd like to biss things—well, damn you, let's see how quick you can fill your hand!"

"He ain't asking for that, Doc!" Beauty Devine stepped quickly between them. "What he said was true. Pink's been a damned fool and a trouble maker. But"—he shrugged—"we can't stand here and wait for that gang. Let's ride. There ain't going to be no fight here, even if I have to stop both of you!"

Old Dalton took a pace backward. "You think you sure are a plumb bad man, Beauty!"

Devine nodded, his dark, skeleton face unchanging. "Knowing I am bad and you thinking you are makes two of us, Dalton. Don't ask me to fill my hand. I'm just the man to do it."

CHAPTER II

Jennie

RICE FIDDLER said, his voice low but firm, "This ain't the place to stand and fool. Pink Dalton ain't worth a quarrel, much less a fight. Come to think of it"—his smile was thin and hard—"I ain't right sure you are, either, Doc."

"And I suppose"—Beauty Devine turned his deep pits of eyes upon him—"that could go for me if a man coaxed you a little!"

"Nope, Beauty, I wasn't thinking of you." The old man's smile became a leer. "Get back on your horses. We got what we come for. Now the job's to try and get away with it."

Pink groaned and cursed as they rode on with Bull Jackson and Art Drum, the watchful hawks, bringing up the rear. It seemed still to be the Kid's duty to keep his strong hand on the wounded Pink's arm. Pink gripped the saddle-horn, his face twisting with pain. He was being given scant sympathy, for no one in the outlaw bunch except his father had ever shown any love for him, and old Doc Two-gun himself was showing little now as he swallowed his pride after the short quarrel with Rice Fiddler, and led the way on.

Devine and Fiddler had the money bags, and were zealously hanging on to them. None of them knew as yet just how much they had taken from the bank. As if worrying more about the money than about the posse, old Doc kept them close to him as he set the pace at a tireless rack which good horses could hold for hours, without stopping for a rest.

An old-timer like Fiddler could have only contempt for the way the job behind them had been handled. Holding up a bank was simple when men went at it right. Good men rarely had to shoot anybody. Smelling the muzzle of a six-shooter made most bank tellers and clerks turn green at the gills and do as they were told.

Now and then the best of men ran into a jackass or two. Old-timers just caught them by the coat sleeve with one hand, spun them forward and half-around. Forefinger slipped behind the trigger to prevent a shot, the blow was struck on the backward half-spin, and down and out would go the jackass.

Rice Fiddler knew how it was done. But he had not managed this deal. Each time he had opened his mouth old Doc Dalton or the smart Pink had cut him short.

"It'll be my good-by job to the bank-robbing business," Rice had told the bunch only last night. "Once I get ten or twelve thousand dollars in my poke again I aim to be satisfied. That much will amount to a heap of pesos in the mountains of Mexico. Nobody'll see me north of the Border again."

They were in tall country here, but needed it taller, the canyons and gorges deeper. Heading as they were now they would soon have to cross Calico Creek valley and drive straight on into the deepest and darkest walls of the Rockies. In them somewhere would be a place to hole up. There they could divide the money and stay in hiding until it was reasonably safe for them to part company, each man picking the way he wanted to go. Later, if old man Dalton could have his way, they would meet again and plan another job.

Right now they had to keep in mind that the telegraph line to Purple City would be busy for hours. The instruments would be clattering like mad as they sang their tale of blood and wrong that had come to the little town of Calico Creek. Out of Purple City the Wyoming lines along the railroad would chatter the story east and west, north and south. By sunset, papers from San Francisco to New York would carry the story. Calico Creek would be pin-pointed on the map. For hundreds of miles around it traps would be set, men and guns waiting to flag down the bandit gang.

•

ONE name would headline the news. Only one name could. The other bandits would still be anonymous. That name would be Sam Bronson, traitor to the country where he was born, one of the killers of the man who had been his friend when others had turned their backs on him as the son of a one-time outlaw. The story could not reach Trigger Dan Ringo to hurt him, but it would reach the old sheriff's blue-eyed, blonde granddaughter, who had been waiting since she was fourteen for Young Sam Bronson to come back to Calico Creek, and her.

Jennie Lane and Trigger Dan had been expecting him. He had written a letter to the girl from southern Utah only twelve days ago. Now that he had come and gone as he had, it was going to be a blow straight to her heart. And now with her grandfather gone so tragically, too, what terrible thing Jennie might do was something the Kid tried feverishly—and futilely—to keep out of his mind.

He was one of the damned riding with the damned, legal prey to be shot on sight like a killer wolf. But any thought of trying to escape from these outlaws was a thing of the past. Given the opportunity now he would not take it. Thrown in with them at the point of a gun, it would take the same thing to get him away from them.

With Pink Dalton still groaning and cursing in his saddle, the Durango Kid knew that only thoughts of Little Cat Creek and the doctor there were filling the older Dalton's mind right now. Old Doc Dave Waterbury was the one man in this country who would do his best for friend or foe who came to him sick or wounded. He had brought Pink Dalton into the world, but the mother had died in giving him birth.

Once the medico had called Doc Dalton friend, but no longer, knowing the man for what he was—outlaw. Waterbury would not be happy to see the Daltons come to his door.

The riders kept to the rim for four miles. At the head of a pine-choked coulee Doc Dalton led the way down it. Rice Fiddler looked back at the trail of disturbed pine needles they were leaving

behind them, and broke into a fit of swearing.

"Why'n hell don't we carry a big flag?" he snarled. "Damn it, Doc, we're leaving a trail a blind man can follow."

"Ain't no need of trying to hide our trail here, you old fool!" Dalton glowered back at him. "We're heading for Little Cat Creek. We'll be long gone when they get there, but they won't be long in knowing we've been there."

"And when the posse gets this far," growled the old outlaw, "they'll have a pointer showing 'em just where you're going. What's to keep 'em from trying to short-cut us?"

"I aim to do all the short-cutting!" Doc snapped back. "More'n that, I'll still bet there ain't nobody back there with sense enough to follow a cattle herd's trail unless Trigger Dan Ringo was along to lead the way."

Down and across the valley they rode, then headed over rising rough ground filled with scrub timber. When they were putting the creek behind them the Kid heard Bull Jackson and Art Drum talking about him in low voices.

"Me, now," drawled Jackson, "I wouldn't go to all this bother. I'd just drop a bullet in him and have it done."

"The same goes for me," agreed Drum, "but I reckon the old man's got better things in mind. I never knowed a man to hate anything as bad as he hates the Bronson name. I've heard him cuss it in his sleep."

"Pink'll hate him just as much now!" Jackson chuckled. "But I reckon you know them's Pink's fancy belts and six-guns he's wearing. And how Pink did cuss when his dad filed off the firing pins of them guns!"

NOTHING they were saying was news to the Kid, and he paid little attention. He had not been allowed to forget who owned those belts and six-shooters. Pink Dalton had cursed him roundly for wearing them when they had been buckled on him down there in the ravine just before the gang had set out to rob the bank. Letting him wear the belts and six-shooters now was only to save Pink or some of the others from carrying them on his saddle. Both weapons were useless unless some good gunsmith could reshape the firing pins.

When they reached the shelter of tall rocks on the crest, looking back they could see horsemen up there on the Devil Drums where they had been not long before. At the moment it looked as if all was confusion, with excited men waving their arms and hats and galloping back and forth. Rice Fiddler rubbed his jaw, smiling slowly as he spoke.

"Dalton, you might be just damn fool enough to be right."

"They're looking for them signboards you was talking about now." Dalton could grin again. "Hell's fire, I told you they couldn't do nothing without Trigger Dan. They ain't had to do nothing without him in the past thirty years."

"Get on where we're going!" Pink Dalton glared at his father through dazed eyes. "Damn it, I—I'm going to die unless you get me to a doctor!"

It was like the devil asking for a blessing and soon having it appear. For as they turned in their saddles to ride on, two bobbing figures on horseback came in sight on an old trail, streaking toward the foot of the ridge below. They rode side by side—a tall, lean old man in shiny black on a rack-o'-bones bay, and a girl in a bright blue shirtwaist and a black skirt, on a little buckskin. A white hat hung behind her shoulders on a strap, and her pale blonde hair shone in the sun.

"Look!" Old man Dalton's hand suddenly lifted. "Ask for the devil and see him appear! Damn it, we don't have to make that ride on to Little Cat Creek, Pink! There's Doc Dave Waterbury right now, and he's got a job on his hands whether he likes it, by hell, or not!"

"Who's that with him?" Beauty Devine was staring, a grin on his old-death face. "I'd say she's worth meeting!"

"Women and you!" Dalton leered at him.

But the Durango Kid was no longer

riding with them as he stared down the slope. Instead, Young Sam Bronson had suddenly returned, Mexico and the Border forgotten.

For the girl down there with old Doc Waterbury was Jennie Lane!

CHAPTER III

Doublecross

OLD MAN DALTON galloped on ahead to stop the doctor and the girl. When the others rode up a six-shooter filled his hand, its muzzle covering Doc Waterbury.

"What I want these days I take," he was saying. "You'll do something for Pink and you'll do it damned fast!"

"I've never yet seen the time I wouldn't do what I could for a man, Dalton." Waterbury was showing no fear, but his dark eyes had grown narrow with his mounting anger. "No use in you trying to act the dramatic damned fool. Seems to me you always did try to play bad when a chance came handy. The one thing that kept you from being the real thing was the born lack of guts. Damn it, I—"

"Sam!" The girl's high-pitched voice suddenly cut the old doctor short. Six-shooter or no six-shooter, she spurred her little buckskin forward. "It—it *is* you, Sam! It's *you!*"

"Now ain't that nice!" said Beauty Devine, rocking in his saddle with laughter. "What a purty gal to waste sweetness on that damned lobo!"

Ignoring him, Jennie was leaning out of her saddle, with the Kid's arms around her, their lips meeting. Sweethearts from childhood, nothing was going to stop them here.

He was trying to smile when she pushed herself back to look at him.

"The last picture you sent two months ago was just like you are today, Jennie." he said. "On the same little horse!"

"Was her grandpa dead in it, too?" Beauty Devine was still watching her with a hungry leer. "Leaning back on the jail porch filled full of rifle balls?"

"What's he talking about, Sam?" cried Jennie, turning now to look at the skeletonlike figure. "Doc Dalton said something about his bunch robbing the bank in Calico Creek when he come dashing up to us!"

"They did rob it, Jennie," he told her grimly. "I was with them because I had to be. Old Doc Dalton says he wants to finish ruining the Bronson name."

"And—and this man," she jabbed her thumb toward Devine—"said something about Gramp."

"It was bad, Jennie."

"No!"

"Yes." He nodded, again reaching out his arms to her. "I think all six of the men who were in front of the bank were shooting at him, and I'm sure he was dead when I looked back at him as I was being forced to ride away at gun point."

"Oh, damn you—*oh!*" Pink Dalton's squalling voice startled everybody. Doc Waterbury was trying to examine his wound. "Keep that prodding damn finger away from me!"

"Even as a baby you were mean, Walter." It was probably the first time in years anybody had called Pink by his real name. "Killed your own mother the first day!—Be still! I'm only trying to take a look, you fool!"

"I'm shot, damn you!"

"And I didn't say it was the chicken pox or the mumps, Walter." Doc Waterbury was trying to be patient. "You're in bad shape, but I've seen men a lot worse off. There's little I can do for you, with you sitting on a saddled horse. You belong in bed. It'll at least give you a chance to die with your boots off! All I can do right now is to give you a couple of tablets to ease the pain."

"Give 'em to him, then!" snapped his father. "What you're trying to say, I guess is that he needs a doctor and a nurse. That means you and the little gal on that buckskin are elected. Give him

your tablets or pills, and we'll all be moving on."

ALARM showed in the doctor's face. "But—but we're not going with you, Dalton! Jennie's been with me at Tom Carson's place all night. Tom's wife is having a new baby. We're worn out."

"Give Pink the pills!" Old Dalton's six-shooter was cocked. "We ain't got time to set and listen to you! I figure somebody back in Calico Creek will know that one of this bunch was shot. When they find out we headed this way they'll know we're heading for your place on Little Cat Creek. If you'll ride with us here and now to where you can get busy, we won't need to go on to Little Cat."

Argument by the doctor was futile. A couple of minutes later they were riding on, the doctor forced to keep to Pink Dalton's right side, Sam Bronson and Jennie to his left. Behind them Jackson and Drum once more brought up the rear, both grinning.

Pink Dalton's extra six-shooters were on his saddle. Not one to take chances with them so handy to the Durango Kid, Beauty Devine had unbuckled the big belts from around the wounded young outlaw, hanging them on a strap below the right side of his saddle-horn—an entirely unnecessary procedure to the Durango Kid who had so suddenly returned to being Sam Bronson.

For Pink Dalton had fired every cartridge in the weapons in the wild fight in front of the bank. Slamming them back in their holsters he had emptied his rifle at the old figure on the jail porch. Then, dropping the rifle in the dust, he had wheeled to climb into the saddle of his black mare and race through the alleyway.

"I ain't got nothing in particular agin you, Doc," growled the older Dalton as they rode on. "As far as I know you've always tried to tend to your own business in these parts, but that don't go for them other two."

The doctor again tried to argue. "What have Young Sam Bronson and Jennie ever done to you?"

"Their damn kinfolks have done plenty!" snarled Dalton. "Old Trigger Dan kept his jail door open for me. Bullet-hole Sam killed my daughter!"

"That's a lie about Bullet-hole!" ripped back Waterbury. "I was there the day he sold you that horse. He'd just bought it—told you he didn't know a thing about it, but there were some signs he didn't like. He told you to wait—"

"Ride on!" Dalton gave him a painful jab in the ribs with the muzzle of his six-shooter. "I know what I know! Let everybody keep their damn mouths shut as we ride. Times like this I don't like to hear folks squawking like a flock of excited magpies."

Mounting the crest of another high ridge they turned in their saddles and looked back. Riders were still up there on the Devil Drums, a cloud of dust lifted above them. One group of horsemen seemed to be merely galloping back and forth. Another string of riders were in the higher rocks, their horses stumbling, picking their way.

"Ain't they the little detectives, though!" grunted Doc Dalton. "The bright and busy boys hunting for the one hair or piece of rag that'll show 'em how to go! That's enough to tell anybody old Trigger Dan's all done for. If he was in the saddle we'd be trying to shoot it out with him just about now!"

Wild country lay ahead, tall mountains looming, peak on peak sawtoothed against the sky, eternal snows crowning the high humps and bald domes far above the timberlines. Gouged and sliced into the great slopes were the canyons, the knife-narrow gorges, frowning walls of cliffs standing on frowning walls, everything green below, everything bare, still and mysterious above.

IT WAS their last chance to look back. By nightfall, in spite of having to stop four times with the snarling and cursing Pink Dalton they were deep in the big hills. Behind them lay the trail chosen by Rice Fiddler, for their destination

had been left up to him.

The outlaw had been on the dodge back here at three different times in the past, and had forgotten none of it. Once allowed to lead, he had taken them up and down streams, scattered them several times, entering and emerging from narrow cracks in towering walls of cliffs, blinding the trail so that even bloodhounds might have lost it in the first half-dozen miles, and never found it again.

They had had to take the rebellious Doc Waterbury in hand several times. Once, suddenly wheeling on him, Beauty Devine had tumbled out of the saddle to hand him a blow from the butt of a Mexican quirt, while Sam Bronson and

"Purty, ain't it?" Fiddler lifted his hand to point. "Lost Heaven, some of the boys used to call it."

Below them was a little valley surrounded by towering cliffs. At most it was not over a mile wide. Half-mooned against a great bulge of cliffs in one side of it was a shimmering little lake fringed with enormous old cottonwoods and shaggy willows.

Pink Dalton was just behind Fiddler here, still humped over his saddle-horn. In the rough places the older Dalton had taken charge of him, once wanting to tie him in the saddle to make certain he wouldn't tumble out of it in a spell of dizziness. Pink cursed him. Now in the

Sagebrush Sam Says:

Never ask a stranger where he's from. If he's from Texas, he'll tell you. If he ain't, it don't matter.

the girl were forced to keep their distance.

When a little round moon was high over the Rockies old man Dalton began to curse.

"Damn it, Rice, I think you've lost the way!"

"Me, now," chuckled the old man, "I never lose nothing. Ten or twenty years would make no difference to me. Once I've been to a place I can go back to it. Just ahead from here we'll have to string out in single file. It'll be steep, and plenty dangerous just to our left. Once down the stretch things will be easy."

They were coming to it a few minutes later. Crossing a short, flat-topped rise, the old outlaw led the way down a shadowy ledge trail in the wall of a narrow gorge. Far below raced a noisy stream, whipping itself into a white froth over sawtoothed rocks before dashing out of sight under a dark cliff.

single line the old man was just behind Pink. Beauty Devine was behind Dalton. The doctor, the girl, and Sam Bronson were behind Devine, the ever-watchful Jackson and Drum still bringing up the rear.

They were within eighty yards of the foot of the trail when Pink suddenly straightened in his saddle as if coming out of a doze. Groaning with pain, he stared ahead, his eyes widening. All at once he was cursing Rice Fiddler, the voice coming out of him like the barking of a vicious dog.

"Damn it to hell, we're off the trail! Where are the Twin Sister Peaks? I'm no fool! I've looked for them as we crossed every high place! They mark where we want to go!"

"I've been looking for the same things," put in Devine. "It's looked to me like we was heading 'way north of 'em!"

"That's right, Beauty, and dumb as you

are you've guessed it!" Fiddler sneered.

FIDDLER had come to a curving shelf overhanging the racing water below. The moonlight fell on all of them, a shorter shelf curving in the rocks above them. The old man had thrown up his hand, bringing all the horses to a stop as he turned in his saddle, eyes bright, but his face suddenly hard and tense.

"Pink, right from the start I didn't aim to head for the place your dad wanted," he said. "When I ride with damned fools like this bunch I treat 'em like damned fools. In all my goings I've never rid with a worse bunch than this."

"Gawd, I was afraid of it!" That groan came from Art Drum, the last man in the halted line. "I was afraid of it!"

"Just don't get excited now." Rice Fiddler's voice carried a faint hint of laughter. No one yet seemed to notice that a long old six-shooter was cradled in his gnarled right hand, the hammer cocked. "Around dangerous horses you don't make fast moves. You talk low and gentle and move slow. If you don't you're apt to get your guts kicked loose and your brains pawed or stomped out. Now, boys, before I bust out laughing myself to death there's one question I'm almost crying to ask. How did any of you fools ever get it into your brainless heads to think that an old-timer like Rice Fiddler was going to let you keep all that fancy spending money we got back yonder at the bank in Calico Creek?"

"What fools!" Art Drum's voice had become the dull sound of a buzz-saw in a knotty plank, and in the moonlight his face was chalk-white. "Damn it, folks, we're covered! Even Bull Jackson ain't seen that yet!"

"The hell I ain't!" Jackson was reared back in his saddle like a big frog, face white and voice croaking, hands slowly lifting. "I'm looking a gun muzzle square in the eye, right above me!"

Doc Dalton suddenly shouted, "Boys, the old buzzard's doublecrossed us!"

"Had to wait quite a while to catch the point, didn't you, Dalton?" Fiddler was grinning from ear to ear. "Damned if you ain't the most unsmart feller I ever saw!"

Pink Dalton was fool enough suddenly to lunge his horse forward, his wound forgotten. "You old son of—"

The flash of a .45 cut him short and stopped the horse with a quick sliding of hooves. Pink reared straight up in his saddle, ruddy face sick and yellow in the moonlight for just an instant before a ruffle of blood spilled down it, gushing from a round, dark hole above the bridge of his nose. Reeling out of saddle, he came down on his shoulder on the rim of the shelf. For a second his heels were in the air, making two frantic kicks. Then he was gone, a tumbling figure bound for the rocks and swift water below.

"Anybody else want to die right fast?" Old Fiddler was still grinning, looking at them all through a ring of gunsmoke that seemed to have whipped a silvery-gray halo around his head and shoulders. "I'm a right accommodating old cuss. Been just itching all over to do that to Pink since the first hour I met him."

CHAPTER IV

Riders in the Sky

WATCHFUL as the outlaws had thought they were, they were trapped before they suspected it. All at once it seemed that they were merely glancing upward—and abruptly before their startled eyes there stood a line of six men above them. Old Rice Fiddler had distracted their attention, letting them see nothing until he was ready.

Instead of sawing for a six-shooter, Doc Dalton sat still and straight in his saddle, his face bloodless, his hands lifting. He tried to speak, but the sound was only a hollow and meaningless rattle from a dry throat. White lips were drawn back in a grimace of grief and terror that seemed to freeze him in his saddle.

The six men up there on the narrow

shelf each stood solidly, back braced to the rock wall behind him. In the hand of each man was a cocked rifle, with a grim face above it. At a word from Rice Fiddler or an uncertain move on the part of the startled horsemen death would erupt, and no man just below would be able to escape it.

"As I was saying," old Fiddler was going on, "there ain't a mite of use in getting excited. You've seen what happened to Pink. That swift water down there makes a nice graveyard—no digging, no pitching earth. The big hole where it goes out of sight—nothing ever comes out of that hole. Over in that little Idaho town in Bitter Root Valley, Dalton, I told you I didn't want to throw in with you, but you just would have it your way, threatening what you'd do if I didn't join up with your little scared coyote pack.

"Once before that you tried to get me to rustle some fine saddle stock for you when I was hiding out, and you was supposed to be a honest horse doctor. I told you I wasn't no horsethief, so you tried to work me into a trap so's Trigger Dan Ringo could pick me up and chase me back to Texas. Only he didn't like to do nothing for a lobo like you. I sorter hope old Dan didn't die today."

"But he did, Rice!" The answer came from a gaunt-faced man on the shelf above them. "Me and two of the boys here was in town like you told us to be when the job was pulled. Ringo died where he stood on the jail porch. One thing about the mess'll maybe make you feel good. Seems that that Durango Kid down there with you, him being better known hereabouts as Young Sam Bronson, he managed to drop an empty money sack in the way just before the door was being closed on them folks in the vault. That sack kept the door from closing tight. The blacksmith, working plumb fast with a gang, got it open before you fellers reached the top of the Devil Drums, and the men and the young woman come out all right."

"Which is going to let me sleep easy when I get the chance." Old Fiddler nodded. "I saw the Kid drop that sack, otherwise I would of shot Bull Jackson down just as he was about to slam the door.—Let's haze this bunch on down and take their guns. You won't need to bother with the pair the Durango Kid's wearing. Smart old Doc Dalton fixed them so's they won't shoot."

Two men dropped down to the wider shelf, the others holding their places with the cocked weapons. Experienced at the business in hand, they were not long in disarming their prisoners. Weapons changed hands rapidly and were tossed up to the higher shelf.

IT WAS the same when it came to the money sacks on Beauty Devine's saddle. Down they came and were passed up to reaching hands on the upper shelf.

"Now unsaddle Pink's mare and turn her loose," ordered Fiddler. "Put the riding gear under the overhang. Later on some of us can come back and get it and the mare. As to the money I'm carrying on my saddle, I'll just keep it. This coyote pack won't be needing it."

"And—and you set yourself to trick us!" Dalton was finding his voice at last in a nervous sputtering. "You meant to do it clear from Idaho to here!"

"Why, hell, yes!" Fiddler was about to burst out laughing. "From Idaho here, yeah! And ever since the job was done today the men you see here have been keeping tab on us, falling back or riding around ahead of us, knowing I'd somehow work it to be leading this pack before I was done. The three in town didn't have to make that wild hell rush to the Devil Drums. All they had to do was drop back, hit the high places, and"—he shrugged—"here they was."

"You won't get away with it, Rice!"

"Naw?" Fiddler looked at Doc with a leer. "Mind telling me what'n hell *you* can do to stop me? String 'em out, fellers! We'll move along."

It was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire as far as Sam Bronson, the doctor, and Jennie Lane were concerned. Here were six tough outlaws—

seven, with Fiddler, their canny leader. What they would want to do with their prisoners was something that could not even be guessed. Just one thing was certain, and that concerned Sam Bronson. If any of them were from the Texas border country, they were not going to like that other name of his—the Durango Kid.

For the Durango Kid had come to mean something to outlaw gangs down on the Border around Laredo, and as far south as Brownsville. Working both sides of the Border with Mexicans and Americans, he had sent smugglers and outlaws tumbling. Some of these men here now could have friends or connections down there, could have an impulse to get even, and back here in these wild hills anything could happen without the outside ever knowing it.

With Pink dead, and everything else suddenly going against him, Doc Dalton was soon like a man in a daze, sitting straight in his saddle, face tight and ashen, lips tightly compressed, without a word coming from him.

Behind him the others of what had been his bunch seemed to have had half the life taken out of them.

Beauty Devine had been ogling the girl and passing remarks all along the way. Now he was quiet, something catlike about him as he sat his saddle looking straight ahead. Once or twice it looked as if he might be smiling faintly, then that expression was quickly gone. Drum and Jackson stuck close together, white-faced like the rest. All of them evidently knew that silence was best in their situation.

Strung out under watchful eyes, they were not long in reaching the lake in the distance. Here it looked as if there would be a halt, but the prisoners were merely herded to one side of it, hugging close to the foot of the cliffs.

With old Fiddler still leading the way they were soon turning up a ledge trail. Rounding a sharp shoulder they entered a gashlike break, winding on for about six hundred yards before they were through it. Suddenly it was like coming out on a great porch overlooking the lower end of a long, wide valley at their feet. The towering walls and wind-eroded cliffs that enclosed it seemed a full mile high. Racing toward them was a sparkling stream that dived under the cliffs below them, making the lake behind them, and the white-whipped water in the gorge where Pink Dalton's body had so quickly been carried away.

RICE FIDDLER waved his hand toward a pale glow of light that appeared to be set in the foot of a tall upswing of cliffs in the distance.

"Yonder, Dalton, is your first glimpse of Music Valley. Here's where the sweetest, saddest music in the world plays when the wind blows just right along the faces of all them holes you see in the cliffs. Knowing about it, and hoping to make a name for yourself, plenty of times you've done your best to get the law on every side of us to wipe out everything back here, but though you knew there *was* such a place you couldn't tell the law how to get to it—and you never could find it yourself."

"Maybe you *are* a smart old buzzard, Fiddler." Dalton was finding his voice again. This time it was almost steady, only a quaver of hatred and stewing anger accenting it here and there. "On the other hand, maybe you ain't. I could of picked this Music Valley for my own hideout if I'd wanted it. And I *did* so know where it was. But something else I didn't know years ago, I know now. Nothing stays a secret once two men know it. Without telling you why, I set my goal on Twin Sister Peaks. And there was a damn good reason for it, Fiddler."

For a moment it looked as if Dalton were about to laugh. Then he went on:

"You may not know it, but your Music Valley ain't safe no more. While you set there and grin at me like a damn fool let me straighten that face of yours out for you. A fine-looking young woman was back here at the time I tried to get you to rustle some stock for me. Her name was Fargo Nell Brink. She'd killed a big

gambler and shot a deputy sheriff down in New Mexico. She stayed here until things had cooled off, then pulled out for Purple City, Wyoming, opening a gambling house of her own and otherwise hitting it straight."

"Well, go on." Fiddler frowned as Dalton came to a halt, sitting his saddle with a strange twinkle in his eyes. "After that long, sad tale, just what the hell of it?"

"All right, Fiddler. You want it—you'll get it." Dalton's smile was a broadening leer. "Eight years ago Jim Cook went down there and married our purty Fargo Nell. Jim Cook. in case you've forgot, just about owns the bank we robbed today. He'd backed our purty Nell in setting up that Wyoming gambling house. Used to go to see her regular while she was running it. He was her man."

"Yeah?" Old Fiddle's face had grown hard. "Well—finish it!"

"I figured Fargo Nell would sic any posse straight for Music Valley, after anybody on the dodge. Now—just to finish wiping that damn smile off your face—well, you smart alecks can look and see for yourselves."

He lifted his hand and pointed. Fiddler looked, stared, his mouth bagging open. Up there in the peaks and spurs along the rim was a wide, almost level opening, the moon-washed sky bright behind it. In that opening rode one bobbing figure after another, and there seemed to be no end to the string in sight. Rider after rider appeared. Moonlight gleamed on the barrels of rifles and shotguns.

"And now *Mr.* Fiddler"—Dalton's eyes seemed to dance—"I'd like to hear you laugh your fool laugh just once more! Our little Nell must of drew 'em a map. Or maybe she's leading 'em!"

CHAPTER V

Trail's End

NOW what was the gang going to do? That thought had been sawing through Sam Bronson's mind since he had first glanced at the high rim, and in that V-shaped notch had seen moving figures outlined in the moonlight—riders up there!

That meant that the telegraph line in Calico Creek had reached out, and already men and guns were rimming this wild section. And if what Dalton had said was true, a woman would be helping the law close in on its prey.

"Maybe now"—Dalton was trying to laugh. but it was only a nervous rattle in his throat—"the Twin Sisters wouldn't look half bad if you thought you could do a quick turn-back and make it. Fiddler!"

"Go to hell!" Fiddler was still staring at the line of horsemen up there. "That damned woman! I remember her now! Came here with a good-looking gambler wanted for murder in Texas. She was high-nosed, high-aired, didn't take much to the rest of us. But— but there's still places for us to go. Damn it, we won't be beat out!"

"Lighting out won't do you any good, Rice." Sam Bronson spoke up for the first time since he'd been made prisoner by old Fiddler, lifting his hand to point. "They're all around. They've probably already hit the other end of the valley, too, coming in over Lone Deer Pass, skirting the rock-slide country, coming in under the waterfall and cutting through the big hole hidden in the timber south of the creek."

"Say, now, say!" Fiddler suddenly rocked back in his saddle, glaring at him. "Just how in hell do you know so much about this back country?"

"I've known plenty about it ever since I was twelve years old." Sam Bronson was smiling. "Bullet-hole Sam Bronson helped a lot of people back here as long as they were decent, Rice. I think I once heard you say that yourself since I've been a prisoner, rodded under the muzzles of this gang's guns."

"Bullet-hole Sam was a *man!*" That came spontaneously from a tall graybeard on the upper ledge of the trail be-

hind them. He was carrying a pair of money sacks tied to either side of his saddle-horn. "A man—until that damned Dalton setting there hired some low-lived horse-thieves out of the Twin Sisters region to hide in the bushes and bushwhack him! By rights we'd ought to hand Young Sam here a gun that'll shoot and let him blow the old devil's brains out!"

"Shut that talk for now." Rice Fiddler's head was jerking this way, that, eyes straining to see up the valley beyond the light glowing in the distance. "Young Sam can be right about them riders! Look!" He tilted forward against his saddle-horn, pointing up the valley. "What'n hell was that flash I just saw? There's another'n—and another'n, damn it!"

"Moonlight on rifle barrels," Sam Bronson answered him. "When a bright moon's shining, they'll show for miles away."

"Them—them ain't no mile away!"

"Maybe a thousand yards." Bronson was careful to keep from smiling this time. "No more than that."

"Less'n eight hundred, I'd say," put in the tall outlaw. "It looks bad to me, Rice."

"We've got to fall back!" Terror seemed to be getting the best of Fiddler now. "Lead the way, Prince! The rest keep your guns cocked and watch to see these fools don't try and tricks!"

WITH cocked guns bristling, and men nervous and cursing, it was as dangerous a situation now as being thrown into a tiger cage. Excitement was many times higher than it had been inside the bank in Calico Creek. Sam Bronson and Fiddler looked back up the valley before they turned, saw a mob of men coming down it, gun-barrels reflecting the silvery moonlight.

"They'll get only two old women and four crippled-up men in Music Valley tonight," snarled Fiddler as they rode on. "Damn 'em, they won't even want them, seeing they've been here behaving 'emselves."

"Looks clear here!" The cry was from an outlaw riding ahead, coming back over the snorting horses, the excited men and the one scared girl. "Do we push on?"

"Hell, yes!" bawled Fiddler. "Maybe we'll have to hit for the Twin Sisters!"

Most of them were out on the shelf above the lake, with the moonlight bright on them, when the first wild cry of discovery by someone in the oncoming posse struck them like a paralyzing blow straight to the pits of their stomachs. It came from a rocky rise of ground and the cottonwoods beyond the water.

"There!" yelled an excited voice. "There they are!"

"Halt, damn you, halt!" shouted another.

"Halt, hell!" bawled a wilder voice. *"Open fire!"*

"Fall back, boys, fall back!" screeched Rice Fiddler's high-pitched voice. No longer was he the cool old outlaw bullying others over the muzzle of a six-shooter. In the noise of the lightninglike stabbing of the sudden gunfire ahead he seemed to have lost all his senses. "We'll go back and hit for the top!"

No one seemed to know what he was talking about. In his frenzy of fear he was trying to turn his horse in the dark and narrow passageway just behind Bronson. Rearing, fighting at the rocks with his fore hooves, the horse was making it when Sam Bronson saw his long-awaited chance to stir himself into action.

"Follow me, Jennie!" he cried.

Even as he was crying out he was swinging himself to his feet in the saddle. Whirling, he leaped, landing astride the rump of Fiddler's bucking horse. One of Pink Dalton's six-shooters filled his right hand. Before the scared old man could let out a yell, the long six-shooter had caught him on the side of the head, the blow wilting him forward in the saddle. Then as he threw useless six-shooters right and left, to replace them with the old man's weapons, two men on a bucking horse were going back through that passageway, hooves pounding and slashing, the horse bawling in panic.

Bronson's riderless horse was turning behind Jennie when she got her buckskin around. Doc Waterbury was behind her,

having more room to turn, but with bullets from the other side of the lake splattering and glancing on the roofs above him. His horse was snorting and lunging. Just behind him maddened men were yelling and cursing, not one knowing exactly what he was trying to do other than get away from one crazy outburst of gunfire after another from that rocky rise beyond the little lake.

Delay behind Bronson gave him the little time he needed. Armed with both the old man's six-shooters, he reached over the limp Fiddler in the saddle and caught the reins. Dropping from the pitching horse, he gave the animal a quick pull-around. The horse's sudden turn dumped the old man out of saddle, letting him roll loose to the high rim of the shelf, then over and down in the rocks seventy or eighty feet below.

A QUICK jerk on the latigo loosened the cinch of the saddle which, with the two money bags lashed to it, dropped off the horse. A fling took saddle and sacks back in the shadow of the rocks, the horse snorting and plunging as Bronson let the reins go.

The next moment the Kid's own horse knocked him aside and galloped on, stirrups beating and popping as the fear-crazed brute followed Fiddler's horse down the wide ledge. Right behind the bay came the girl, and behind her was white-faced Doc Waterbury. His feet had lost his stirrups, and he was hanging on to mane and saddle-horn.

Bronson yelled, "Swing in and hug close to the rocks!"

The outlaw with the other money sacks was aboard when another crazed horse came charging and bucking out of the passageway. The six-shooter in Bronson's hand came up, roaring. Falling backward out of saddle, both hands gripping the reins, the outlaw hit the rocks, his pull-back bringing the maddened horse to a halt long enough for Bronson to grab the check strap. In a couple of more jerks the second saddle was falling to the ground. The horse, turned loose, raced after the others.

"Give me a gun, Sam, give me a gun!" Doc Waterbury was crying as he dropped from his horse. "We might make it yet!"

Another horse was coming, a riderless one. He must have lost his rider somewhere back there in the mad howling and struggling in the passageway. With a snort the horse leaped over the dying outlaw on the rocks, and was gone, stirrups popping and slapping as he pounded on down the ledge.

It was the last horse of the outlaw bunch. A tremendous smashing and spilling sound of falling rock came now, the mouth of the passageway suddenly gushing clouds of dust and flying bits of broken rock. Bronson and the doctor fell back to Jennie who was standing there in a crouch, staring.

"Men are above us, Sam!" she cried sharply. "Possemen dropping rocks down in the passageway!"

"And yonder comes hell's army!" Waterbury shouted, pointing up the valley. "Trail's end from here on! Squat, you two! When a posseman's scared bug-eyed he'd shoot his own mother-in-law!"

A few minutes later he was standing on the lips of the shelf, in the moonlight, waving his old hat and yelling. Fifty horsemen were coming up, looking like charging cavalrymen, the noise made by their horse's hooves deadened by the sound of falling rocks, and the yells.

"They're here!" bawled the doctor. "Lower them damn guns you're pointing at me! Money's safe and the owlhoots are all here! Take it easy! Take it easy!"

"It's Doc Waterbury!" yelled a rider, pulling his horse down to a quick walk, then a halt. "What are you trying to say Doc?"

"Come on up and I'll write you a letter!" Waterbury slung his arms again. "If you're hunting the gang of jackasses who robbed the Calico Creek bank, then you've found 'em!"

"We heard Young Sam Bronson was with 'em, Doc!"

"Damn it, he was!" bawled the doctor. "Maybe a hell of a good thing he was.

Come on up, I tell you! It's all over but the shouting."

But it was not over for another hour. Big rocks had to be removed from either end of the passageway. Dusty, sweating outlaws climbed over them, covered by guns at both ends of the passageway. With them they dragged one dead man, and a man with a cracked skull.

ONE horse had been killed, struck squarely on top of the head. The remaining horses were imprisoned until the rocks were shifted. In the end it was a sick and sullen line of prisoners guarded by more than a hundred guns.

"We're going home!" growled Doc Waterbury. "Jennie and Sam, whether they like it or not, are going with me. At my house we're going to eat our bellies full and rest. Some time around noon or thereabouts, we'll come jogging along into town. And another thing." He stabbed a finger at a big, dark-haired man with a star on his vest. "Leave alone the old and broken-down folks who've been back here in Music Valley for so long. They're not going to harm you or anybody else. I've been doctoring 'em for years, and I know all about 'em."

"Now you wait a minute!" The big fellow with the dark beard stepped in front of him. "The way this thing has panned out they'll make Sam Bronson the new sheriff of Calico Creek if they have to put the job in a drenching bottle and pour it down his throat. He ought to ride right on in with us and the posse. Why, Doc, Sam's a natural born damn hero!"

"Hero, hell!" The old medico pushed him out of his way. "There's no such thing."

He walked on down the ledge where Bronson and Jennie were impatiently waiting with three horses. ● ● ●

The Nose Knows

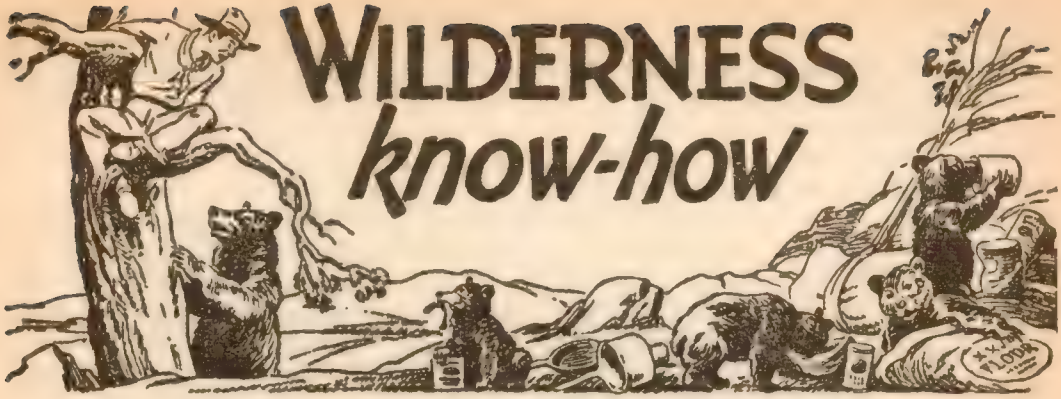
by Ernest Allan

WHEN the whites began learning things from the Indians, they found that the Indians did a lot of things that did not make sense to the whites because the whites could not see the reason that lay behind it. And it has long since been recognized by science that primitive people do a lot of things that make sense without knowing why they work.

One thing that puzzled the whites was the way the natives always blew their breath into the nostrils of an animal they were trying to tame. The Mexican Indians blew into the nostrils of baby calves, sheep and goats, as well as colts and wild horses they were taming. The Plains Indians who captured baby buffalo and tamed them also blew into the nostrils of the animals, and strangely enough, the baby buffalo would then follow them about like tame dogs. It seemed to be a crazy superstition.

Finally people began to see the sense in it. All animals use their sense of smell to identify things. A dog will come up to you and smell of you before he decides whether you are friendly or afraid of him. The late Albert Payson Terhune, a famous dog expert, long ago stated that a dog can tell by your smell whether you are afraid of him or not. And science now knows that fear sets the adrenal glands functioning overtime, and that there is a different odor about an animal that is angry and one not angry. This applies not just to skunks, but to all animals.

Biologists now realize that since animals use their sense of smell so much, it makes good sense to give an animal a whiff of the smell of his prospective master. If the master turns out to be friendly, then the animal has identified the smell of his master with kind treatment, and acts accordingly.



WILDERNESS know-how

THE TAMING OF APACHELAND

IGNORANT men often learn the ways of the wilderness faster than educated ones. Many times over that peculiar fact was proved in the conquest of the early West. The most notable instances occurred during the long, bloody Indian wars. In those campaigns, a knowledge of military science was more often a handicap than an advantage. The most successful officers were those who heeded the advice of uncouth, unschooled frontiersmen.

General George Crook was one of the few who listened to experienced civilian scouts and old trappers. He was quick to adopt unorthodox methods of warfare, advised by those seasoned men. His ultimate triumph was the subjugation of the cruelest, wiliest and most dreaded of all Indians—and then the turnabout, to become the best friend they ever had.

General Crook's first Indian campaigns were in the Northwest, in Oregon and Idaho, where he showed himself to be different from most "big brass."

Along at the start of the 80's, Crook was ordered south to tame the rampaging Apaches. At that time, the armchair generals of the War Department badly underrated those Indians. True, Apache depredations had been widespread. They raided, plundered and murdered emigrants and settlers. They all but paralyzed stage travel. They captured and enslaved white women and children and put their defenders to hideous death by torture.

Strategy

But what chance would those naked, roaming savages have with their bows and arrows against well-armed, well-trained troops? No chance at all, the War Department maintained. The Apaches were no more than sneak thieves, capable of attacking no more than ten men at a time.

When Crook reached Arizona, the War Department had built forts at the sites of most known springs with the idea that the Indians could thus be deprived of water. The forts were heavily garrisoned and the strategy was to drive the Apaches from their rancherias in the valleys. A few months in the dry desert wastelands would bring them to meek submission, it was confidently expected.

Crook had followed a similar procedure in the Northwest. Attacking Indian villages in the dead of winter, he had driven the wretched inhabitants out into the snow and bitter cold, where they had the grim choice of starving or coming into the agencies to surrender.

But sizing up conditions in the Southwest, Crook wisely foresaw that such a campaign would be futile. Run the Apaches from the rancheria villages and

then what? Here the climate was comparatively mild. In small bands, the Apaches could endure anywhere. They knew of hundreds of waterholes in the rugged outlands, tiny oases surrounded by wild game on which they could subsist, and proceed with their bloody horrors.

These far, scattered strongholds were hidden in rocky mountains, too rugged for cavalry to traverse. Trails were scarce, grass even scarcer. Emerging from their hiding places, the Apaches could and frequently did descend on pack trains supplying the forts, thus putting the garrisons in constant peril. It was more likely that the troops would be starved out, instead of the Indians.

So the first thing that Crook did was to split up the post garrisons into small commands, send them out from the forts, and order them to stay in the field until every Apache was dead or rounded up onto a reservation.

On the Defensive

This wasn't the way taught at West Point, but spit-and-polish soldiery wasn't Crook's style. He didn't go by the book. He saw that his troopers were supplied with moccasins and learned to wear them stuffed with dry grass when making a silent, deadly attack over the rocks. He supplied his field commands with mule trains, ordering all animals to be shot rather than let them fall into Indian hands. The mule trains were kept well to the rear of all actions. Each man carried his own rations and ammunition into a fight.

Now the troopers could penetrate Apacheland. They came across bands of Indians entrenched in caves and holes in the rocks. Out of sight of riflemen, the Indians thought they were safe. But they had not reckoned on Crook's game of "bullet billiards." A heavy .45-70 slug, ricocheted off the roof of a cave or the side of a boulder became shrapnel, inflicting grievous losses on the holed-up Indians.

Crook encouraged the taking of prisoners, and from these he recruited a small but effective corps of scouts. They knew all the hideouts. Apaches were called the most treacherous of Indians, but the Apache scouts under Crook were loyal and trustworthy, though unmilitary in manner and bearing.

Now, for the first time, the Indians were on the defensive. They were hunted out and pursued so ruthlessly that they had little time for their depredations. A few surrendered. Crook treated them well, sending some back to tell their tribesmen of the ways of this warrior, Gray Wolf—the Apache's name for Crook.

In a climactic battle in Skeleton Canyon, Arizona, in 1886, Crook's soldiers killed 66 Apaches, destroying many by rolling great boulders down on their canyon hideaways. The most primitive method of combat, old even in days of antiquity, brought the final victory. In 1886, the Apaches gave up. Their ablest leaders were dead—Mangus Colorado, Cochise—and Geronimo was a fugitive in Mexico. For fifteen years they had held out against an encroaching civilization. Now the bloodthirsty Apache was war-weary and really beaten.

Apache Reformation

General Crook then distinguished himself as an administrator as well as a fighter. He put the Apaches to work raising hay. Agency quartermasters bought all the hay they brought in. Since time immemorial, the Apaches had lived by stealing and robbing. Could they be taught to walk in the path of peace?

It was a mass experiment in human nature. Many wrongs and injustices were inflicted on the subdued Apaches, and General Crook did not live to see the end of that experiment. But the Indians learned to apply their wilderness know-how to civilized life. Today, Apaches are among the most progressive and successful cattlemen in Arizona. The old hatreds are forgotten. The Apaches are at peace with their white neighbors and respected by them. • • •

"I don't see no one here big enough to put me into a seat," Wolfer snarled

The Holy Freeze

By BOB and JAN YOUNG

Parson Bond worked a fiery miracle—with the mercury at forty below!

WOLFER GRUTT eyed Parson Bond scornfully.

"A preacher in the Klondike?" he roared. "Why, it's so cold up here, the only thing'll keep you warm is the Devil, and some of this here natch'ral whisky." The gorilla-like miner swilled down another tumblerful of the concoction, generally conceded strong enough to wrench the scalp from a grizzly.

"I will ride with the Devil as long as he goes my way," Parson Silas Bond replied. "And I hope to have a small part in ladling out the Holy Writ, even to the —uh—more ungodly of the Klondike, even though this might be a poor place for brass monkeys."

The Parson busied himself distributing hymn books, in preparation for services in the saloon which was the only "church" the Klondikers had been able to provide for the newly arrived churchman.

Defiantly, Wolfer swished down another whisky, spacing drinks with verses from *That's What He Did To Her* and the *Bastard King of England.*

A few miners sauntered in and took places on the boxes and chairs set about by the Parson.

"I'd appreciate it, Mr. Grutt, if you'd take a seat among us so we may proceed with our services," the Parson said, point-

ing to one of the empty seats among the gambling tables.

Wolfer blinked stupidly, then staggered drunkenly toward the Parson. Grasping the clergyman under the lapels with his hairy hands he lifted him from the calk-scuffed floor of the saloon.

"I don't want no seat, and I don't see none here big enough to put me into one," Wolfer pushed his ugly face forward and snarled as he held the Parson, who was wriggling like a butterfly impaled on a pin.

Parson Bond choked, from the combined stench of the lard on Wolfer's hair and the Klondike corn-squeezings on his breath.

"I think you're a coward, afraid to hear the Truth and the Word," the Parson sputtered. "But no one will force you to attend, if you don't wish. Please put me down."

Wolfer dropped the little Parson sharply to the floor, his guffaw raucous but not as hearty as before. He was still guffawing when Parson Bond completed the final prayer an hour later. The services over, the Parson, without looking about, quickly gathered up the prayer books and the few coins in the donation basket and left.

The Parson rejected offers by other Klondikers to fix Wolfer's wagon. Those who offered to do the job explained Wolfer had arrived at the diggings only a few days before and was left alone largely because of his surly, pugnacious disposition.

On turning down their offers, Parson Bond insisted, "My faith is stronger than Wolfer's voice or arms." But as he pulled his parka closer, he could not help wincing when he remembered the humiliation the burly Wolfer had subjected him to at his first Klondike service.

Parson Bond's temper sizzled in spite of flash-freezing cold the next Sunday when he found a smelly musk-sack squeezed in with his hymn books, making them impossible to use. "No one but Wolfer would do such a thing," the Parson commented sadly, "but without complete proof of such cowardice, I wouldn't pre-judge anyone."

But a smile flitted across his face as he recalled how one of the boys told him it got so cold that once a man froze to death while he was tying his shoes. They never could straighten him out, 'cause he was frozen so solid, and they just naturally had to bury him in a drum, according to the story. Only trouble was Wolfer Grutt didn't wear laceboots. And if Grutt wasn't controlled, the Parson thought, the Parson's days as minister in this Klondike community were decidedly numbered.

EYES WIDENED and jaws dropped when Parson Bond was seen striding toward the saloon the following Sunday, wearing a set of guns. No one asked why. They thought if the Parson wanted to call Wolfer Grutt in a shoot-out it was his ticket to heaven.

The Parson stomped on the boardwalk before the saloon, then hung his black guns on a peg outside the doors of the steaming deadfall. He turned as he saw Wolfer Grutt slopping towards him through the icy ruts.

"Are you coming to the services today, Wolfer, you overgrown ape?" the Parson called, goadingly.

The deadly silence was broken only by the click of Wolfer's mouth dropping open. He halted momentarily, stunned.

"We'll overlook your manners to save your soul," the Parson added, pushing open the double doors and disappearing into the vaporous gloom of the saloon.

Wolfer, already higher than a giraffe's toupee, nearly broke down the doors in his haste to set the Parson straight about saving souls. His huge arms flailed everyone aside as he made for the Parson inside the saloon. He made no attempt to draw his guns.

Inside Wolfer again grabbed the Parson and pulled him level with his eyes, glinting in drunken anger. "I oughta tear your pockets off'n you, Parson, and stuff you into one of 'em," the bruiser growled.

"Let me down," the Parson said calmly, "and we'll go outside and settle this matter once and for all."

Surprise wrenched Wolfer's grasp free. The saloon was ominously quiet.

"You walk on outside and down the

street," the Parson said. "You can see I'm unarmed."

Parson Bond buckled on his guns, hanging outside the door.

Stepping slowly, the Parson walked towards Wolfer. "Wolfer, you're just like a catfish; all mouth and no brains," he goaded. "You're cowardly and don't have enough courage to draw those guns and fire. You lack faith in yourself. You don't dare draw and kill me. You're afraid to burn in Hell."

The Parson had stopped within a few feet of Wolfer, standing in the iced ruts. Astonishment finally giving way to rage, Wolfer drew one of his big guns and leveled it at the Parson.

Wolfer's finger squeezed down on the trigger, stopped, no shot belched forth. He looked down at the gun, then at the Parson. Sheer disbelief blanked his coarse features.

Parson Bond stepped up and slapped Wolfer across the face, the crack relieving the silence. Then he back-handed Wolfer.

Wolfer shook his head stupidly, uncomprehendingly, then slowly turned and slouched away from the Parson. Wolfer's gait increased, his strides longer, until he was half running. The Parson watched him disappear from sight, then turned towards the saloon where services would be conducted.

When the other Klondikers began talking about the "miracle," the Parson explained.

"Wolfer wore his guns into the steamy saloon, then out again. All that collected moisture from the saloo—er—church froze the action tight. But Wolfer was basically a coward, and he just didn't have faith in his guns, or faith in himself.

"And you sure have got to believe in yourself if you expect to be a tough guy, or even a Parson at Klondike," Parson Bond smiled. • • •

HOSS LINGO

by JOSEPH C. STACEY

LISTED below, in jumbled fashion, are 10 terms relating to the *equus caballus* (horse, that is), together with a short explanation of each. Can you match up at least 7 correctly for a passing score? 8-9 is good; 10 excellent.

1. CROPPER	(a) the slowest pace, in which the horse has always two or more feet on the ground
2. SCUT	(b) to control a horse with bit and bridle
3. WHINNY	(c) a sudden turn by a horse
4. HAND GALLOP	(d) a fall from a horse when one is thrown over the horse's head.
5. CAVORT	(e) hiccups in a horse
6. PIROUETTE	(f) to dock—i. e., shorten or cut off—a horse's tail
7. SNAFFLE	(g) to free a horse from the pressure of a check-rein
8. THUMPS	(h) to prance
9. UNBEAR	(i) a moderate gallop
10. WALK	(j) the low and gentle cry of a horse

ANSWERS: 1-d, 2-f, 3-j, 4-i, 5-h, 6-c, 7-b, 8-e, 9-g, 10-a.

Wherever he turned, water sprang from the parched earth. But what good is water to a man burning with gold fever?

SODBUSTER'S

LONG, DUSTY miles lay behind Bill Urlis as he tooled the team of little Spanish mules and the spring wagon over to the water trough at Dry Wells. The parched mountain country about him was familiar although he had never been here before. As he looked around, his wide, black eyes seemed to stare at things other folks couldn't see. And the undecided twitch at the corner of his mouth gave the impression that the muscles there had come just so far toward a smile, then waited to make sure a smile was the right thing.

With his head nodding in agreement to a thought, he muttered, "Hereabouts."

The picture in his mind was as clear as if he had seen it last night. Only this time he'd keep his mouth shut about it. No need to invite people to call him a fool.

The thirsty sucking of the mules at the water broke into his musing. He brought his lean, lanky frame erect and stepped to the ground.

"That'll be one dollar, stranger."

Bill turned to see a bespectacled little man in white shirt and shiny serge trousers coming at him. Evidently the storekeeper.

"You talking to me?" Bill asked.

"I reckon I'd better hitch up and go now," Bill said slowly

GOLD

a novelet by FLOYD DAY

"That's right. One dollar."

Bill cocked his head. "What for?"

"Water," the storekeeper explained. "Fifty cents a head for your mules for all they can drink. We haul that water twenty miles out of the mountains in a tank wagon. Water is gold in this country."

For a long time Bill stared at the water. There was nothing gold-colored about it. Finally, his big-boned hands fumbled in his pockets and from one of them he brought out a dollar.

"First time I ever paid for water. But I reckon it's all right if a man wants to sell it."

"Nobody complains." The merchant gave Bill an appraising look. "If you're going far I'd advise you to get yourself some big water barrels and rope them on your wagon. Dry country."

For a few moments Bill felt confused. Nowhere had water entered into his dream. Just the country and gold. He looked off into the distance, across the greasewood flats and on to the dark rim of yonder mountain. And somewhere up there he thought he saw a glow that sort of beckoned. His eyes widened, and for the barest second he smiled.

"Don't reckon I'm going far," he said.

"Going to homestead?"

Slowly Bill shook his head. Homesteading one place had been enough. "Not exactly. I'm looking for—" He caught himself, then shrugged. Let people think what they would. When he found what he was looking for they'd change their minds about him being a fool. "I've got some gold to dig out."

"Gold!" The little storekeeper looked at him the way folks back home had done.

Bill wanted to explain why he knew there was gold in the mountain. The reason was the dream that had come to him three times—a dream of gold. Each time it had left an indelible impression and an irresistible desire to move towards that gold. At first it had baffled him, but he gave up trying to figure it out after a while and now he felt at peace with himself. Others might have their doubts, but he *knew*. No, he wouldn't try to explain it to the little storekeeper. He just wouldn't understand.

"You sure you ain't been out in the sun too long?"

Bill shook his head, his eyes wide and tolerant. "Reckon not." He watched the merchant walk away pulling at the lobe of an ear. When he got to the corner of the store he squinted over his spectacles at Bill, shrugged and disappeared from sight.

A twinge of doubt caught Bill off guard, but he looked at the mountains again and their familiarity restored his faith. With long, slow strides he moved around front and entered the store. His needs wouldn't be much. Never had been. With his bedroll and patched clothes in the wagon he had his well-worn digging tools. So about all he'd need would be a little grub. Beans and flour and sidemeat.

"Can I help you?"

TO BILL the voice was like the tinkle of bells far away, and he stood there in the store straining for the last lingering echo of it. Then he turned toward the counter and saw her. Her eyes matched the blue of noonday sky, and her hair was the reflection from last night's fiery sunset. Bill rubbed his eyes and stared some more.

"Is there something you want?" Her voice had changed and it brought Bill back abruptly to his needs. He forgot what they were.

"Well," he said, still looking unbelievingly at her. "I reckon not."

Confused, he turned to go, and as he did, he bumped into a little girl with a doll in one hand and her mother's hand in the other. She would have fallen if Bill hadn't caught her. Frightened, she drew away from Bill's big hands and clutched at her mother's skirts. With long black curls hanging beneath a city-bought bonnet, she looked to Bill to be about four years old.

He stepped back. "Sorry, Miss. Should have been watching where I was going."

"That's all right," the mother said.

Bill looked up and then saw her. A sprinkling of alkali dust made gray lines along the shoulders of her brown dress. She was small, with hair black as the little girl's. But the way she held her chin made her look taller, and her gray eyes had traces of sadness in them. There was something else in them, too. Bill looked deeply into those eyes just as if he were looking into the tunnel of a mine that he knew held gold.

That she had been traveling he could tell by the dust on her hat and the wrinkles in her skirt. Then Bill saw the two valises by the door.

He started to tip his hat and move on when she said, "Could you direct me to the old Bennett place?" Then she smiled sadly. "I'm Cordelia Skarr." She indicated the little girl with a slight lift of the clutched hand. "This is Patricia."

"Howdy," Bill said to Patricia. Then to Cordelia, "Reckon you'll have to ask somebody else about the Bennett place. I'm a stranger here."

The girl behind the counter said, "I'm Sally Mercer. My dad runs the store. The Bennett place is about fifteen miles out. North and west. You—you plan on going out there?"

"If we can get a lift," Cordelia said.

Sally frowned. "There's nobody there. Hasn't been anyone for nearly two years."

Bill saw Cordelia's chin come up a little.

"Yes," she said. "I know. John Bennett was my—my uncle. I thought possibly we could get somebody from the livery to drive us out."

"No livery here," Sally said firmly. "Where you want to go is no place for a woman and little girl. Even John Bennett couldn't make it. It killed him."

Cordelia winced, then said sadly, "I didn't expect much."

Something about her held Bill's attention. Maybe it was the lift of her chin. Or maybe it was the deep sadness in her eyes. Or maybe it was her undefined beauty. Not the quick eye-catching prettiness of the girl behind the counter, which was like a piece of clear quartz with visible streaks of gold, but rather like a piece of rough rock that made a man want to crush it and see what was inside. Bill saw it that way, but it was something so fleeting it was gone before he could put his mind to it. He looked again at Sally.

"Reckon there are several items I'd better take along after all."

She smiled and Bill forgot all about Cordelia and Patricia. Sally's movements were as smooth as creeping shadows as she gathered the items he asked for and placed them on the counter.

"Reckon that's it," he said and dug out a little leather pouch he'd made from elk hide.

WHEN HE went out the door with his supplies he saw Cordelia and Patricia standing on the porch looking off down the stage road that lost itself in the winding distance. An offer to help them was on his tongue, but it stayed there, and he went on to the wagon. He loaded his supplies in the back and climbed to the seat.

Something made him look back, and as he did, his eyes got all tangled with Cordelia's and before he knew it he said, "If you're not particular in what you ride, ma'am, I'd offer to drive you and the little one out to this Bennett place."

The shadow that had hovered over her face vanished and the sudden light that came warmed Bill.

"It would be mighty nice of you," Cordelia said. Then she was moving with quick little steps toward the two valises.

Bill was slow in coming to her assistance, but he got down in time to place the valises in back of the wagon and help Patricia to the front seat. When he came to Cordelia he wasn't so sure. She settled his uncertainty by climbing up the wheel without his help.

As Bill went back around the wagon he saw Sally standing on the store porch bleakly watching. He halted.

"I'd be obliged," he said, "if you'd point out the way to this Bennett place."

Sally tossed her head. "You're wasting your time. You'll be bringing her back after she sees what's there."

Bill said dreamily, "I don't mind coming back." Something hot crawled up his neck, and he added quickly, "Miles don't mean anything to me."

"Straight down the road you're heading on, then at the fork keep right. It sits up on a bench at the end of the road. I wouldn't take any woman out there."

She turned back into the store and Bill climbed to the wagon seat and shook out the lines. Patricia sat next to him but closer to her mother.

There wasn't anything Bill had to say and for a while he watched the dust-spouts kicked up by the mules' hoofs.

"It was nice of you to go out of your way like this," Cordelia ventured.

"It's not out of my way," Bill said slowly. His eyes lifted toward the mountains and the twitch started working at his mouth. He was aware that Cordelia was watching him.

"Bonny! Gay! Giddup!"

Sun-scorched miles, desert and alkali miles, crawled behind them, and stretched out before them until they came at last to the grade that would take them upward to the bench and the old Bennett place at the end of the road. Farther back the slope steepened, then there were the mountains, formidable and rough.

The climb to the bench was steep, and midway, Bill ventured a glance at Cordelia. Her hands were tightly clasped in her lap, her neck stretched upward and her

eyes strained for a first glimpse of the Bennett place.

Bill asked, "You aiming to live here?"

"We expect to." She kept her eyes straight ahead and her face was set.

Bill looked around at the sparse grass, brown and parched and curling from heat and lack of moisture. It wasn't until then that he began to wonder why a woman and her child would come out here to live alone. But he didn't wonder about it too hard. He didn't believe in questioning what folks wanted to do.

They came up over the last hump to the bench, and here, Bill reined in the mules to give them a blow. But mostly he wanted to give Cordelia a chance to take a quiet look at things.

A ONE-ROOM log house sat back about a half mile, but with his keen eyes Bill could see that it wasn't much. All right for a man but he had his doubts as to whether it would strike a woman's fancy. His eyes swept over the benchland, then lifted to the mountains. And there they lingered longest.

"That's it," he said, but he was talking to himself and speaking of the mountain.

"Yes," Cordelia murmured. "We might as well go on."

They went on, Cordelia looking at the log house and Bill at the mountain.

A sudden wave of pity for Cordelia swept through Bill as they pulled up in front of the place and got down to inspect it. As they walked inside he couldn't bring himself to look at her, to witness her distress.

Only the roof and the logs framing the cabin were still there. The door and the windows were long since gone. Cows had used the place as shelter against flies and the hot sun, and their droppings on the earthen floor, dried now, gave the place the appearance of a barn rather than of a place fit for humans. A rusted iron stove in a corner leaned tiredly on three legs. A splintered table was half buried under manure. Bill went to an opening that had been a window and looked across the benchland to the mountains.

Ridges, like long tapering fingers, reached toward the flats, and in between the ridges were gloomy-dark canyons. Bill saw all this but he was thinking of Cordelia and Patricia. Finally, he turned to them.

"If you want I'll drive you back to town."

Her chin trembled, then it came up and her eyes flashed.

"Thank you," she said quietly but resolutely. "We're staying."

Bill didn't say any more. There was something about this woman gave him a feeling of kindship. He went out and got the two valises from the wagon. It came to him then that you couldn't pack much in two valises to set up housekeeping, but he didn't study on it.

For two hours he worked to make the place liveable. He shoveled out most of the cow dung, hung the door and covered the windows; he hammered out the battered stove pipes and set them up.

Cordelia helped. A smudge covered her right cheek. Bill glanced at her, then looked quickly away.

"There ought to be water around somewhere," he said. He went to the wagon for a bucket.

When he returned after an hour's search for water, the bucket was still dry. But he didn't say anything to Cordelia about not finding water. Instead he got a big canteen from the wagon and brought it in.

Cordelia had blankets spread on the floor in a corner and Patricia was asleep on them. A fire sputtered in the stove.

"I—I didn't bring any supplies," Cordelia said. "I wasn't sure what I'd need." She gave Bill a quick smile and looked away. "I just wasn't sure we'd—"

Bill understood. She just wasn't sure they'd stay.

"I got plenty," he said.

Along with a frying pan and a coffee pot he toted in the things he had bought in town and set them by the stove.

"I'll pay you for what we use," she said. "And tomorrow, if you'll make a trip for me I'll pay you for that, too."

Bill thought of Sally. "No trouble. Just

remembered a few items I forgot myself."

There was something here he didn't understand. But then there were a lot of things he didn't understand. He wasn't going to fret over it.

Bill reckoned they made out all right their first night. Before dawn he crawled from his bedroll beneath the wagon, built an outdoor fire and boiled coffee. Afterwards, he took one of the little mules with the canteen and a small water barrel and headed toward the mountains two miles away.

Something akin to instinct led him up a ridge his dream had made familiar, then he angled off to drop part way down into a canyon. Stunted cedar and juniper grew there but mostly the country was rocky. Bill looked around carefully, his heart pounding with excitement.

With eager hands Bill built a small monument of rocks as a marker. Each rock he examined carefully. But, like Cordelia, they told him nothing.

Leading the mule, he dropped down into another canyon, and coming to a sandy bar at the bottom, he dug. It was hard digging around the rocks with only his hands, but after a while he was rewarded. Moisture. Then water seepage. Patiently, he watched the hole fill.

It took time, but he got the barrel and canteen filled. Sand and clay clouded the water. But it would settle. Given time, Bill thought, everything settles clear.

By midmorning he was back at the cabin.

Cordelia stood outside looking at the parched grass on the bench. At sight of Bill she smiled wearily.

"Good morning," she greeted. Her eyes lighted at sight of the water dripping from the barrel and canteen. "Did you have to go far?"

"Up yonder a bit." Bill nodded toward the mountains. "I reckon I'd better hitch up and go to town now."

SALLY MERCER was behind the counter when he came into the store. She looked at him with a triumphant smile.

"You brought her back, did you?"

Bill looked around to make sure he was alone.

"Oh," he said, "you mean Mrs. Skarr? Nope. She's still out there. She's staying."

The smile left Sally's peach-tinted face, and she said in a convinced voice, "She won't stay long."

"I reckon she'll stay," Bill said. He got out the list Cordelia had given him.

When Sally got the supplies together on the counter she studied Bill curiously.

"Has she hired you to work for her?"

Bill had the feeling she didn't like Cordelia.

"Reckon not," he said. "I got my own work cut out."

"What'll she do out there alone?"

"Alone?"

Sally's eyes narrowed. "Are you living in the house with her?"

Bill blushed. "Look," he said. "She doesn't mean anything to me. I've staked a claim in the mountains."

"A claim? What kind of a claim?"

She sure was interested in what he was doing. He glanced at her shyly. She was the prettiest thing he had ever seen. "Mining," he explained. "Gold."

"Gold!"

Bill didn't like the pitying way she looked at him.

"You're— There's no gold around here. Men have searched under every rock and in every mountain."

Bill shrugged. There was no need to argue. But he felt impelled to say, "It's there. I'll find it."

Sally looked at him with new interest. "You believe it, don't you? Well, maybe you will find it. I hope you do. But that— that woman will never stay."

"I don't know about her," Bill said. "But I'm obliged to you for hoping I'll find the gold." He wanted to linger but he took the supplies in his arm and left.

Time passed swiftly for Bill that winter as he tunneled into the mountain. Twice a week he hauled wood and water to Cordelia. She offered him money but he refused it.

"Need to get away from the hole once in a while," he said.

Cordelia got down her little black-bound book and put pencil marks in it.

Water in the tunnel didn't begin to annoy Bill until March. He just took off his shoes and worked barefooted.

The last week in April when he made a trip to Cordelia's he saw that she had spaded a garden spot. He didn't say anything. No need to tell her that whatever she planted would dry up.

She looked at him proudly. "Bill, come summer we'll have green things to eat."

He couldn't bring himself to tell her there'd be no green things. The thought of how disappointed she'd be hurt him. He'd help her all he could, but in the end he knew she'd see the hopelessness of it all and leave. It just wasn't a place that would grow anything.

The next few weeks Bill tried to get rid of the increasing water in the tunnel. He ditched it into the canyon and there it had its natural run downhill toward the bench. Where it spread out the grass grew with green life.

When Bill made his trips to the cabin he noted this, but it was still over a mile to where Cordelia lived. If he could get water that far he wouldn't have to pack it for her and he'd have more time to spend in the tunnel. But there was too little water and the dry, thirsty land would gulp it up long before it got that far.

Still, Bill kept thinking about it. That is, he thought about it when he wasn't thinking about the gold somewhere back beyond the tunnel.

But the farther back he tunneled the more water he encountered. Little tricklings that ran down the floor. To keep it moving out of the tunnel he built a V-shaped trench.

Then in the scorching heat of summer Cordelia's garden dried up and she had to spend her dwindling supply of money for canned goods. Bill tried not to notice the worry wrinkles beginning to form on her brow.

BUT WINTER came again and still Cordelia stayed. Bill, beating away at the rock in his tunnel, wondered what kept her. In the spring she planted her garden just beyond the foot of the canyon where water from Bill's tunnel came out.

She surprised Bill by saying, "I'm going to build a new house here." The glow in her eyes reminded him of a sunrise. He couldn't help but admire her, but in the end he knew she'd lose. A woman could stand just so much of this kind of life.

The garden did better than Bill expected.

That winter she annoyed him by wanting to take so many trips to town. He set it down to loneliness and wanting company.

"Bill," she said, "I hate to take you from your work but there are matters in town I have to take care of and I don't have any other way of getting there."

She'd go to the bank for a while, then she'd stop by to talk with Myles Stach, the lawyer. Bill could see that Myles had taken a shine to her. At first this made Bill moody. Then he told himself that she deserved a good man if she could get him. One that would bring her to town and keep her and Patricia.

Sally was joshing Bill about his gold mine when Cordelia came in the store.

"No doubt about it, Bill," Sally was saying, swishing her red hair to make Bill's eyes sparkle. "You're going to be a rich man. What'll you do with all your money?"

"Money?" He hadn't thought about the money. His dream went only as far as the gold. "Never thought much about it," he admitted.

Sally looked at him incredulously. "You mean you're going to be rich and you've never even thought what you're going to do with it?"

For a fact he hadn't. He shook his head.

Cordelia gave Sally a reproachful look. "Bill," she said. "Are you ready to go?"

Cordelia never questioned him about the mine. He didn't know whether she thought him a fool or not.

With help from town, Cordelia got the new house built just below the mouth of the canyon.

The garden that summer was big for a

woman to handle. But Cordelia managed it, and Bill found himself carting produce to town. Cordelia and Patricia went along and they returned with supplies and equipment.

That fall she bought a plow and had Bill turn up a good part of the benchland.

Come spring Bill planted it in wheat.

Bill got so he was afraid to come out of his tunnel lest Cordelia find some other fool thing for him to do. But the wheat came up, turned the color of gold. Cordelia had little ditches all over the place.

They got the wheat harvested and when they took it to town Cordelia spent a longer time than usual with the banker and Myles Stach. When she came back to the store where Bill waited she told him that Myles wanted to see him.

Bill ambled over to the little rough board building that was Myles Stach's law office and stood there before Myles twisting his battered hat in his hands.

Myles, dark, mustached, a well-groomed man in his early thirties, looked at Bill as if he were a worm crawling across the floor. "I understand you got a mine back of the Bennett place . . . and you think there's gold in it."

Bill nodded, then looked around the room at the shelves of law books.

"But you haven't found gold yet, I reckon," Myles said. He ruffled some papers on his desk. "I'm interested in your mine. I suppose you've made the proper recordings."

Bill brought his glance back to him. He'd forgotten about the recordings.

"Would you consider taking a partner?" Myles looked down at his hands. "Not a working partner," he added, "but as a sort of investment. Maybe you could use tools or powder. Things like that. Kind of speed along your search."

Bill's twitch started working.

"I've got tools. I reckon they'll do. I'm in no rush. That gold's been waiting there a long time. I don't reckon it'll hurt it any to wait a little longer. Thanks just the same." He put on his hat and shuffled out.

On the way home Cordelia asked, "What did Mr. Stach want?"

Trail Topics

Billy, the Kid, the outlaw, began his life of crime at the age of twelve in the mining town of Silver City, New Mexico.

* * *

Sign at the outskirts of Earth, Texas, proclaiming its annual rodeo: "Earth's Biggest Rodeo."

* * *

The loftiest regular post office in the United States is in Leadville, Colorado—10,152 feet up.

* * *

The Indians of New Mexico were making rope and crude textiles from the fibers of the yucca plant long before the first white explorers showed up over 400 years ago.

* * *

One of the greatest of all ranches was that belonging to Charles Beauhien—a 1,714,764 acre affair granted by the Mexican government in what is now New Mexico. The Congress of the United States later confirmed Mr. Beauhien's title to the land.

* * *

Navajo Indians, with no word in their language for "millions," allude to it as a "big thousand."

* * *

"Boots" Toms, Nevada, Iowa, never wore shoes in the ninety years of his life—only boots.

* * *

Many Indian babies never cry. Squaws train their papooses to be silent by holding their hands tightly over the mouths of the infants.

By HAROLD HELFER

Bill thought about it a moment, then shrugged. "Not much."

Not long after that Cordelia bought her own horses and a wagon.

"Bill," she said, "I've used your wagon and mules long enough. Besides, you must be tired of my taking you away from your work."

IT WASN'T until the next day that Bill got to thinking about it. But the feeling was there when he got up. It was an empty feeling. He'd never thought about it much before, these trips to Cordelia's and to town. Maybe they did take him away from the tunnel and irritate him, but now that she wouldn't need him any more he felt lost, and hurt.

Then in the spring when he saw a man working around the place down there he knew that his usefulness to Cordelia was over. Maybe she'd decided that she didn't want him around. He went back to work in his tunnel. By now water made a small river down the floor. But it didn't keep Bill from working. That's all he had to do now—work.

It was fall when he decided he'd better go to town for his winter supplies. But when he checked the money in his pouch he found there wasn't much left. Hardly enough for winter supplies. But he'd get what he could and make them do. He remembered Myles Stach's offer but again quickly rejected it.

As he drove by Cordelia's he saw that more of the benchland had been put into wheat and harvested. He would have driven on but Cordelia stepped out the door and hailed him.

"Where have you been, Bill? We've missed you."

Sight of her sent a quick stirring through Bill. He smiled and quickly let the smile die.

"Lots of work to do," he muttered. "Going to town. Anything I can get for you?"

She stood before him in a freshly-starched flowered dress and it seemed that most of the sadness had gone from her eyes. Bill glanced at his own clothes, dirty and sworn, and it came to him that he wasn't very presentable and this made him eager to go on. He lifted the reins.

"Won't you stay for lunch, Bill?"

He looked again at his clothes. "Reckon not. I've got to be going."

Patricia came out with a new doll and she grinned up at him. Bill caught himself grinning back. She was getting to be quite a little lady.

Cordelia said again, "Won't you stay, Bill?"

Bill wanted to stay. He hadn't realized how much he had missed them. But, well, he should be going on about his business.

"Another time," he said and slapped the reins against the mules.

Cordelia called after him, "Stop in on your way back, Bill! I have something to talk over with you!"

He didn't say he would or he wouldn't.

In town, at the store, Bill was careful about what he bought. Disappointedly, he looked around for Sally as Mr. Mercer came to wait on him.

It didn't take long for Mr. Mercer to get his order together.

"That's about all for this time," Bill said and fumbled for his money pouch. He emptied it on the counter.

Mr. Mercer pushed it back.

Bill looked at him.

"You've got a hundred dollar credit here," Mercer said.

Bill didn't understand him. "If that's not enough I'll have to bring the rest in later. When I strike—"

Mercer started sacking the supplies. "Don't worry about paying me, Bill. Your credit's good here." He adjusted his spectacles. "You had me fooled about this talk of gold. I thought you were crazy. I want to apologize, Bill."

"No need," Bill said. "A man can't let other people change his mind. You've got to stick by what you believe. Leastwise I do." He picked up his supplies. "Thanks for the credit. I'll straighten up with you before long."

"Sure," Mercer said with an expansive gesture. "But don't thank me. Thank Mrs. —" He caught himself. "It's all right, Bill. Anything you need."

Sally bustled in swinging a bonnet. She stopped.

"Well!" she said. "If it isn't Golden Bill! Hear you and the widow are in partnership and struck it rich."

BILL'S EYES widened at sight of her —the red of her hair, the long curve of her neck. She sure was pretty. He was on the verge of smiling. But what was this about a partnership with a widow and striking it rich?

"Hush, Sally," Mercer cautioned.

Sally tossed her head ignoring him. "I knew the minute I set eyes on her she'd wrap you around her finger." Red spots appeared on her cheeks.

Bill looked down at his work-roughened fingers as if he expected to see something wrapped around them.

"And all the time you thought you were digging for gold. She knew you wouldn't find gold. And she didn't care so long as you got water for her."

"Sally!" Mr. Mercer said sternly. "Go on to the back."

"No," she said. "She'll keep on working Bill for all she can get out of him, and now she's got Myles Stach taking her to dinner when she comes to town." She scowled. "Maybe they're already engaged to be married. Bill, you're a fool!" She stormed through the store to the back.

As if she still stood before him, Bill muttered, "Maybe I am a fool. But I don't reckon I've hurt anybody by being one." He took his supplies and went out to the wagon.

He drove slowly. Somehow there wasn't much urgency in getting back to the tunnel. He wondered if Cordelia and Patricia would live in town when Cordelia married Myles Stach. It would sure be better for both of them. Then Patricia could go to school. A kid ought to go to school. And a woman ought to have more things than Cordelia had. Maybe Myles Stach could give her those things.

He felt despondent, lonely. It wouldn't be the same passing by an empty house. But Patricia would have a father, and Cordelia a— He tried not to think about it.

He would have driven on past Cordelia's again if she hadn't been waiting for him.

"Supper's ready and waiting for you, Bill!"

Patricia held a doll in one hand and her mother's hand in the other. They reminded Bill of the first time he saw them.

His chest felt as if he had a tightening noose around it. He was conscious of Cordelia's black hair and the deep look in her eyes, as if she were holding them wide open for him to read what was inside. He would sure miss those eyes. He looked across the bench at the waning light and the dark mountains beyond.

"Got to get back to the digging before night."

A shadow flitted across Cordelia's face. "I have something to tell you, Bill."

Quickly he looked away, his hands working nervously with the reins.

"I heard." He wished his throat didn't feel so tight. "It's mighty nice for you and Patricia. Now she can have a— Now she can go to school.

Cordelia looked at him quizzically.

"What did you hear, Bill?"

He kept fumbling with the reins, reluctant to say more. "About you and Myles Stach." His voice sounded hollow. "You've worked hard here. It'll be easier for you there."

"Where, Bill?"

"In town."

The old flash came back to her eyes. "Patricia and I are staying right here. As for Myles Stach, I don't know what you're talking about. You'd better come in to supper while we get this straightened out."

Confusion tangled Bill as he wrapped the reins around the brake and climbed down. Cordelia took his arm, something she had never done before, and led him into the house.

BILL blinked as he gazed about. He saw furniture, solid and comfortable. Boards for a floor, and rugs on them. Curtains at the windows, starched and fluffy. And the table was set with china dishes.

Cordelia stood by the front door as if she intended to block it in case he took a notion to bolt. But he just stared in astonishment, and muttered, "Pretty," and twisted his battered old hat nervously in his hands.

Cordelia moved beside him. "Oh, Bill. Don't you see, I couldn't have had any of this without you. You and your mine have made it possible. You may not have found your gold yet but you've given me the richness of it. The water has been our gold."

She was holding his arm and he was conscious of the pressure on it, and also alarmingly conscious of her closeness and of the stirring within himself.

"Bill," she went on, "Mr. Higby at the bank lent us money and I bought up all the land below us."

Bill said, *"Us?"*

"Yes. It's your water and that's what makes the land valuable."

Bill found it hard to think straight. "You're welcome to the water. I'm glad you can use it."

Cordelia shook her head. "No, Bill. Sit down."

He sat down very carefully on one of the new chairs.

Tears sparkled like jewels in Cordelia's eyes. She bit her lip. "John Bennett," she said hesitantly, "was my husband. Shortly after we were married he wanted me to come out here with him. I was afraid." She paused and seemed undecided whether to go on. Her chin lifted to its old proud height.

"I did a mean thing, Bill. I left John for another man. Then John came out here alone. I was foolish then, Bill. Very foolish. Too late I learned how much John loved me, how much Patricia and I needed him. He died before I could get enough money to come out here and join him. After that I just had to come. And no matter what I found I was determined to stay."

Bill sat there looking at her with his eyes wide and an ache in his chest.

"That first night— Oh, if it hadn't been for you, Bill, I would have left. And if I had I would have been miserable all the rest of my life."

Patricia came around and leaned against Bill's knee and sat her doll astride his leg. "Give Milly a horsey-back ride."

Absently, Bill began jiggling his leg. He was thinking of other things. Like the time he gave Mr. Mercer the dollar for the water his mules drank, and the look Mr. Mercer had given him when he said he was going to look for gold. Today Mercer had apologized for something. Then as if he were alone—looking at nothng, far away—Bill muttered:

"It's there. I know it's there."

"The gold, Bill?"

"Yes."

"Of course it's there." She frowned. She sought for words. "Maybe not just like you thought, though. Does it make so much difference, Bill? Water here has the richness of gold."

"It's there," Bill muttered. "The dream—" He tried desperately to cling to his belief. But he kept thinking what Mr. Mercer had said, "Water is gold in this country."

"It might be, Bill, that gold was a symbol in your dream." She came over and put her hand on his shoulder. "Sometimes things don't turn out just exactly as we thought they would."

Bill felt something flow from Cordelia's hand into him. It stirred him and made him feel aglow. He looked up at her and smiled weakly. Her eyes were softer than any he had ever seen.

Patricia poked him with a finger. "I think you'd make me a good daddy, Uncle Bill." Every little girl should have a daddy." She looked up at Cordelia. "That's what Mama says." Her chin lifted just as Cordelia's did at times. "And I think she's right."

Bill sat there very still for a long time thinking about it. Finally he looked at Cordelia with his wide eyes as if he were looking through her and on into the future.

He said dreamily, "Cordelia, I reckon we should get married so I can be Patricia's daddy." ● ● ●

The broken horn pierced through the wolf's middle

RED TRAIL

By SETH RANGER

His antlers were bloody, but his head was unbowed

THE BULL MOOSE standing seven feet high at the shoulders and with an antler spread of seventy inches, browsed for leaves and twigs along the Yukon River. He weighed fourteen hundred pounds. Fifty of these were accounted for by his antlers.

Except during the Fall mating season, when nature made them rivals, the bulls herded together, as now, on their cen-

turies-old grazing ground along the Yukon, foraging for food. A hundred yards distant, two barren cows and three with calves grazed—in accordance with custom—separately.

It was the spring of 1898, a spring which was different from past springs, when the thaw set in and the ice went out of the Yukon and the moose moved to higher ground to feed and fatten. In past springs the rare prospector, an occasional Indian and wolves were moose's only enemies.

But in the spring of 1898 thousands of boats were following the ice down the river. Miners finding the upper creeks staked from mouth to source were fanning out and staking claim to ground on the first likely creek.

Feeling safe in the thicket, the grazing moose paid scant attention to the two men who suddenly turned their boat toward the bank on which they grazed. The men, themselves, were not visible until they climbed the bank and crawled into view.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the roar of a .45-70 rifle. The lead slug struck one of the cows, passed through her body and tore a big hole on the other side as it left her body. The cow leaped high into the air, then dropped. Her calf began to bawl. Again the rifle roared, and a second cow dropped.

"Hold on, Lafe," one of the two men said. "We've enough meat. No need to kill any more."

"Hell, Joe, there's plenty of moose," Lafe answered.

He was bearded, swarthy and dirty, but his rifle was clean and his dark eyes shone with a killer's lust.

"My favorite part's the tongue, Joe," Lafe said, and his rifle roared again, dropping a third cow. Flattening a fat calf with a fourth shot, he leered and said, "A little veal wouldn't go bad."

With the two barren cows, the calf, and its mother down, Lafe eyed another calf, bawling nearby. "Hell!", he chortled sardonically, "It'd be cruel to leave an orphan to die." He fired and the orphan calf dropped.

"Come on, Joe, the others have hit the brush—let's bleed 'em," he said.

He put down his rifle, whipped out a razor-sharp hunting knife and advanced on the nearest calf. Joe followed, his strong, young face dark with disapproval.

As Lafe was cutting the calf's throat, its mother, who had been grazing in the brush, charged. Her weapons were a hard head, sharp hoofs and mother love. She knocked Lafe flat with her head, checked her charge, turned and drove her hoofs into Lafe's shoulder. He tried to rise, but the hoofs flattened him. He screamed with a mixture of fright and pain.

Joe raced back to the rifle, caught it up and fired. The cow dropped. Joe looked remorsefully at the cow. "Sorry. I should have let you finish the job," he muttered to himself.

Joe dropped to his knees and examined Lafe. "You aren't hurt bad, but you could've been cut to ribbons." He helped Lafe to his feet and slowly they made their way down the bank to the boat.

"Lafe, if they're all like you, there won't be much wild life left along the Yukon. Hunting for meat is one thing. Killing for tongues is something else. If supplies don't come up the river from Saint Michael, there may not be enough meat left to keep men from starving next winter."

"Shut up!" Lafe snarled. "There's plenty of moose—country's alive with 'em. You're too damned soft."

JOE DIDN'T answer. He just unloaded the boat and began dividing the equipment.

"What in the hell you doing?" Lafe asked.

"We're splitting up," Joe answered. "You aren't the kind I want for a partner. Parding with you'll only lead to trouble with the Indians and other prospectors. Either you killed for the fun of watching the moose drop, or because you like tongues and want to eat better than the rest of us. Or maybe you just don't give a damn. But whatever's the answer, I don't want any."

"Who gets the boat?"

"You do," Joe replied.

"What you going to do?"

"I'll manage," Joe said. "You'll drift with the current. In a few days you'll be as good as ever."

"You're crazier'n a loon," Lafe said. He watched sullenly while Joe loaded half of the outfit into the boat. Then he got in and took the oars.

"Good luck," Joe said.

Lafe didn't answer. Joe watched him until he was around a bend in the river, then he muttered, "At that, I'm luckier than the moose." He climbed the bank and went to work with his ax and knife cutting up the meat. He built a fire, then hung several large pieces of meat on overhanging limbs, so they could be seen by those coming down the river. Two parties landed and took what they could use. Then a lone man landed.

He was bearded, young, quick to laugh and with a reckless light in his eyes. His name was Parker and he listened attentively to Joe's story of Lafe's butchery. "Don't blame you for busting up with that kind of a pardner. Mine drowned in White Horse Rapids. If you want to throw in with me I'll figger I'm lucky. But let's be sure other outfits get the meat we don't need. In this country a man can't afford to waste anything."

"Let's look around," Joe said. "Lafe might have wounded another moose that wandered off. He was shooting pretty wild."

Circling the area in search of bloodstains on the grass the two men stopped suddenly when Parker shouted, "Look!" His gaze riveted on the founteen-hundred pound bull, standing seven feet high at the shoulders and with a seventy-inch antler spread.

Counting three bulls, including the big one, and two cows with calves, Parker added, "Too many bulls not enough cows. Guess the cows are being killed faster than the bulls because of their better meat. Unless that big feller takes charge and leads the others away from here, to a safe place where they can mate and multiply, won't be no time before there isn't a moose left alive in this region. It'll be that way all along the river. Too bad that big feller doesn't know."

Joe, who had been gazing a long time at the bull said, "Maybe he does know. Animals get smart when the chips are down. And the chips are sure down for that big bull. It wouldn't surprise me if some shoot-crazy fool took after his head for a trophy."

"Yeah, and then decided the skull and horns was too heavy to tote around and throw 'em away," Parker said wryly. "Well, we've done all we can." He beckoned Joe to his boat. "Let's go."

INSTINCT warned the big bull of the nearness of danger. He had heard Lafe's rifle shots and seen the killer's victims fall. But he was not used to hearing so many shots, one after the other. Usually it was a single shot from a lone miner or Indian, killing for food. And only a single animal dropped—a loss of small impact.

But the big bull had heard several shots, and several animals threshed about, tearing up the sod and filling the air with the scent of their freshly flowing blood. And long dormant instincts were aroused.

The bull grew wary and, while he normally paid scant attention to the cows, except in the fall, he moved protectively toward them, followed by two smaller bulls. The smaller bulls were actually heavier than average, but they seemed undersized beside him.

This was their early summer range. The bottoms adjoining the creeks were dense with willows, aspen and birch—ideal for browsing moose. The band stopped frequently to browse, but there was a steady movement away from the Yukon.

During the first week after Lafe's murderous foray, two more cows with calves, and another barren cow joined the band. The third week they climbed a wind-swept ridge where the big bull hesitated. Like most of his kind, he disliked wind. There was a compulsion to turn back to the creek bottoms and food. Two of the cows started to do so, but the big bull drove them ahead in spite of his own hesitation.

Finally they found shelter under a cliff

which broke the wind. And suddenly, the smell of blood permeated the air. The man-fear returned to the big bull, and a restlessness swept through the others. The cows with calves laid their ears back, ready for trouble.

A wounded cow, calf at her heels, limped toward them. Fresh blood oozed from a furrow in her rump. The movement of muscles as she walked kept the wound open. Her calf was thin from lack of the milk which her unhealthy condition had caused to dry up. They joined the band.

Twenty-four hours later, driven by hunger through the pass, the moose reached the summit of the ridge. Smoke from a warming fire filled their nostrils, and the big bull saw two bearded men panning gold.

The younger of the two reached for his rifle. But the older shook his head.

"When you've prospected as long as I have, Chuck, you'll have learned not to shoot so fast. If moose hang around your camp, you won't have to pack the meat as far. When we run out, we can pick off a barren cow.

"I guess you're right, Pop," Chuck said to his partner. "But with all the talk of too many men in the Yukon, and too little grub, you don't like to see a half a ton of meat walking off."

"Before the frost comes, Chuck," the old man said, "We'll build a meat cache on stilts, knock off a couple of those bulls, and stock up. Meat will freeze and we won't lose none."

"I hear the bulls are tough and—"

"Yep, that's right," Pop admitted, "but you've got good teeth, and there ain't much you can do in winter except cut wood. You've got plenty of time to chew tough meat. Come spring, the cow you didn't kill will have a calf."

"I savvy," Chuck said.

"Here's something else to savvy," Pop said suddenly. "Bring your rifle. Now watch by that boulder on the ridge." As the two men watched a grey furry body bounded into view. "Wolf," Joe said. "First one I've seen since we got here, This ain't supposed to be wolf country."

"But the miners are killing so much game the wolves are moving to new country for food," Chuck said.

Chuck brought the rifle to his shoulder and fired. The wolf leaped convulsively and dropped, kicking. "There's a she-wolf around somewheres," Pop said. "You've made a widow out of her."

"And scared hell out of the moose," Chuck said. "Look at that big bull go. Driving the others ahead of him."

THE BIG BULL led his band slowly into new country below the pass. It was a country of lakes, nesting ducks and geese —free of man. The bull waded into the nearest lake, thrust his head beneath the surface and came up with a mouth filled with water plants. The other bulls and cows joined him. A sense of peace came over the moose for the first time in many days.

When tired of lake food, the big moose moved to the plateaus nearby where he began stripping the alders of leaves and twigs. He took on weight as fall neared. The velvet peeled from his antlers, and he began polishing them on convenient trees. They grew hard and dangerous. The other bulls gave their antlers equal care. Their coats glistened. The rivalry for mates returned.

In search of mates, the bulls prowled the ridges in October, ears alerted for the call of a lonely cow. The cows, in their feeding had scattered. The absence of danger from man had lessened the herd instinct to live or die together. Ice coated the ponds and the lake borders. The ducks and geese flew south and the green swamps turned a dismal brown and plant life yielded to the first fall of snow. Now the hard life began.

The big bull answered a cow's call with a grunt that changed to a bellow of fury when he heard another bull respond to the cow's appeal. He thundered through the brush and saw the cow. She had a healed furrow on her rump and her calf stood nearby. The big bull saw that one of his grazing companions was to rival him for possession of this cow.

The rival did not hesitate, but answered the big bull's challenge. With quick short steps that built up speed, the bulls lengthened their stride, then met head-on with a crash that echoed through the woods. They pulled apart and charged again. The big bull's antler cut a deep furrow in the rival's side. A light breeze carried the odor of fresh blood.

Now they separated again. Their angry bellows silenced the small fur-bearers. But a she-wolf, with half-grown pups, heard the uproar and understood. She lifted her nostrils to the crisp air and sniffed.

The rivals came together again with stunning impact. There was an interlocking of horns that resisted their efforts to pull apart. Each wasted his strength trying to drive the other into the snow. Physical exhaustion was long in coming, but it came. They were on their knees when their heads sank to the snow. Their hot breath plumed over their antlers in the frosty air and some of it froze.

The hours passed. The short day ended, and the long night began. The stars were bright and cold. The cow, indifferent to the rivals' battle for possession of her, bleated, and a third bull came.

He charged, bellowing, at the big bull and his rival. Both struggled to their feet, and instinctively turned, as well as their antlers would permit, to face this new challenge. The third bull's antlers and hard head struck with a battering-ram force. *And from the side.* The air was filled with horn fragments.

A splintered antler, jutting from the big bull's head, and dagger sharp, caught the third bull's throat. Blood gushed in a torrent. The wounded bull retreated, squared off for another charge . . . fell to the snow.

The big bull backed off, lowered his head and rushed forward to resume the battle with his first rival. During the hours their antlers had been locked, the big bull's heavier head had weighed heavily on the rival's neck. Now as the big bull charged, the rival yielded under the impact. He stood up against one more charge, then quit. The big bull turned toward the waiting cow.

NEARBY POP and Chuck, who had come upon the battle while foraging for their winter's meat, had watched in silence. "I've seen fights before," Pop said, "but never any as bloody as this one. We won't even have to bleed that third bull. The big fellow done it for us."

"There's another cow bellering," Chuck said. "That number two bull is interested."

"He ain't got no chance," Pop said. "That big feller is off like he'd been sent for. And trailing blood from his wounds."

The big bull's battle wounds left red splatters on the snow. The she-wolf and her pups circled to avoid the men, and cut across the bull's trail, then followed it. A barren cow followed the big bull, in his answering pursuit of the second cow's call across a slough.

He came to the slough and stopped and bellowed an answer across it. He tested the ice, which was thick with a glassy surface. His hoofs skidded about, but he made it across safely. The barren cow's right hoof slipped, then the left foot skidded. Her weight did the rest. Her shoulder bones broke as she fell, and she was helpless. The she-wolf hot on the trail, stopped suddenly.

She was prepared to work to bring down a moose. But her work was unnecessary—this one was down. Instinctively she taught her offspring the tricks. She began snapping at the helpless cow's rear-leg hamstrings. Her cubs ripped in with their sharp teeth and she bounded to the cow's throat and slashed until her fangs opened the arteries. Meanwhile the big bull had reached the waiting cow on the other side of the slough.

The madness of October passed in November. The rival appeared with two cows. The big bull, feeding with five, looked up, then resumed feeding. There were five calves in the bunch. The snow was deep and the common need—for food—united the two bands.

They were moving through the willows,

breaking them down by sheer weight and feeding on the tips, when the wolf pack, also united by the need for food, appeared.

A straying calf was in the vanguard, a big dog-wolf in hot pursuit. Hearing the calf's bleat of terror, the big bull wheeled and charged. The cow was already defending her young one. The big bull's broken horn caught the dog-wolf in the stomach and tossed him in the air.

The next minutes were a maelstrom of slashing fangs and goring antlers. The she-wolf and her cubs, also part of the wolf pack, leaped snarling at the throat of the defending cow. She missed, landing in the snow on her back. And, as the she-wolf squirmed to get clear and on her feet, the cow pivoted on its hind legs and drove forehoofs into her stomach.

Blood gushed from the she-wolf's mouth as the cow's hoofs came down on its body again and broke its back. The cow then turned to her bawling calf, under attack by the she-wolf's cubs. One of the cubs had sunk its fangs in the calf's throat and was chewing toward an artery. The other was snapping for a hamstring. The cow's hard head knocked the cub from her calf's throat and her hoofs sent it skulking away, wounded and beaten, into a nearby thicket.

The big bull's head knocked the other hamstring-chewing cub away from the calf, hoofs stamped the life from it.

The calf joined its mother as she bunched with the other cows. Luck, rather than planned-defense had turned the cows' heads outward. They formed a ring protecting their hamstrings from attack as long as the ring held. The remaining wolves of the pack stalked slowly about, fangs flashing, vapor pluming from their mouths. The big bull, roaring with fury, was plunging toward a thicket, striving to shake off a big dog-wolf that had fastened its fangs in his neck. A second wolf was snapping at his hamstring.

The big bull smashed against a tree and the wolf on his neck, crushed, dropped. The big bull turned on the pursuing wolf, lowered his head, and drove his broken horn deep into the animals side, impaling it. The big bull tossed his head, striving to shake the wolf's carcass off, but the wolf's muscles were tangled with the horn. The big bull paused, breathing hard from the struggle.

He saw a cow go down. Nearby the former rival bull was down on his knees. Three wolvs rushed in to eat him alive. The big bull charged. His head, burdened with the weight of the wolf impaled on his antler, plowed through the snow and caught a she-wolf. The impact broke off the remainder of the horn. He reared up and crushed a wolf with his hoofs. The ex-rival got up and charged a wolf attacking a calf.

The calf went down under the impact. The antlers ripped into the calf's rump, but crushed the wolf. Then it was over. Wearily the big bull moved to new feeding ground, breaking trail. The others followed. Behind lay the crimson, churned-up snow, with a dead cow, a dying calf and scattered dead and dying wolves.

Then one April day the Chinook, or warm wind from the south, brought torrents of rain. Snow turned to slush and ran over small creeks frozen down to the gravel. Banks overflowed. The ice grew rotten as it began melting.

And along the Yukon, behind the ice, would come more men in boats they had built during the winter on Lake Bennett. At the mouth, the river steamers, loaded with supplies, waited only for the ice to go out. This was the first break-up after the great stampede.

But the big bull who had always known that man was his greatest danger now knew also that the danger was increasing. Spring grew to maturity and, instead of moving to the lower country, the big bull led his band away from the Yukon. June came and each cow dropped a calf and stood over it, patient and menacingly protective as the newborn calf struggled to stand. The velvet was on the bull's growing antlers, which he guarded with care as he browsed with the other bulls and laid on fat—and prepared for another cycle of resistance against his own kind, wolves and man. ● ● ●

When a wagonload of pumpkins bought peace

by
John Austin

Pumpkin Man

ALONG with the goose that saved Rome, the lowly pumpkin has been slowly edging its way into history. The latest instance, of course, was when it served as a hiding place for documents that sent an American traitor to prison. But the first time the pumpkin got into American history, it had a happier ending.

Almost a hundred years ago a pioneer by the name of Collins settled in the Arapaho country of Colorado. He had been a hunter and trapper, but now he was settling down to raise a family, and he built himself a farm on land which the Arapahoes claimed as their hunting preserve.

The Indians did not like this destruction of their hunting grounds, which seemed to be the white man's favorite pastime, so the chief went to Collins and told him to git.

Collins had dealt a lot with the Indians, and knew how to talk to them. He could not make the chief agree to his staying permanently, but since he had his crops all planted, and had all his possessions tied up in them, he managed to persuade the fair-minded chief to let him stay and work the farm until he got his crops harvested. The chief agreed, provided he would leave as soon as his crops were in. Collins went on working his land.

That fall, when the chief knew that the crops were ripe, he felt the urge to eat a pumpkin. He forthwith sent his wife to Collins with the request that she be given a pumpkin for the chief.

Collins said, "No, I won't give you a pumpkin, but tell the chief that I will come to see him."

The chief's wife went home empty-handed and told the chief. The chief was very much offended that the man he had befriended had treated him thus. He prepared a hot reception for Collins when the latter was to come to him.

In the meantime, as soon as the woman had left his farm, Collins hitched up his team, and had his sons load his wagon with pumpkins.

Then he immediately set off and reached the Arapaho village just a little behind the chief's wife. He got a cold reception because of the chief's offended dignity, and the chief told him off in that flowery language so beloved by the Indians.

When he was through, Collins had his turn to answer. "You sent your wife to ask me for one pumpkin," he said with much gravity. "But I am not a little one-pumpkin man. I am a many-pumpkin man. And whenever Jess Collins has many pumpkins, his friends also have many pumpkins. Behold, I have brought you, my friend, many pumpkins."

And so there was great rejoicing, and Many-Pumpkins Collins smoked the pipe of peace with the chief and the braves, and thereafter he became a staunch friend and advisor of the Arapahoes, and while he lived, he and the chief kept down trouble between the Indians and the whites.

Renegades'

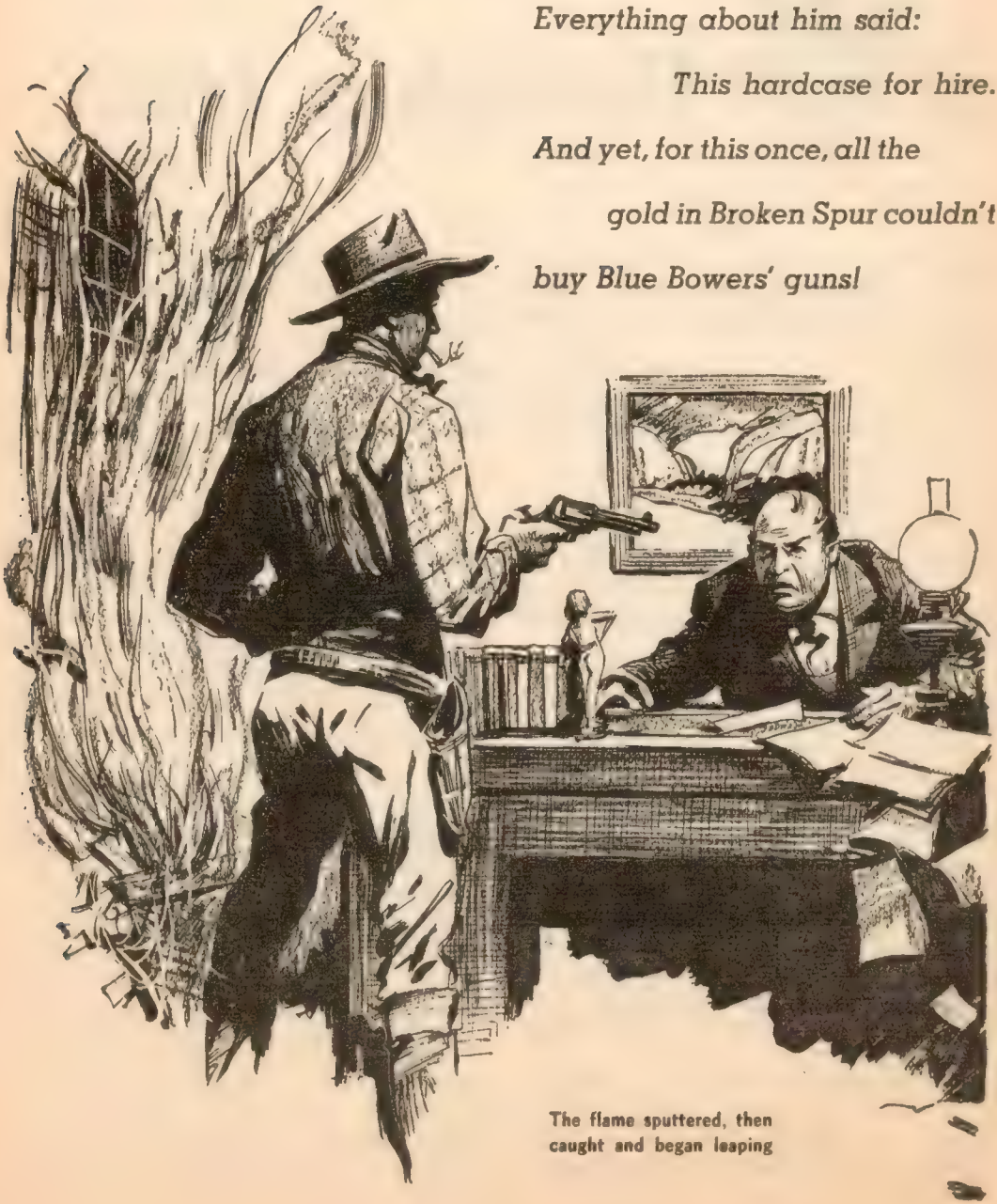
Everything about him said:

This hardcase for hire.

And yet, for this once, all the

gold in Broken Spur couldn't

buy Blue Bowers' guns!



The flame sputtered, then caught and began leaping

Rendezvous

a novelet by AL STORM

CHAPTER I

Surprise Meeting

BLUE BOWERS turned his jugheaded bay mare into Pinchot Avenue, town of Broken Spur, and settled back in saddle. A more cautious man would have paused to reconnoiter, a wiser one have avoided the place altogether. But Bowers, even in his more benevolent moods, made no claim to either distinction. Now, half sick with fatigue and the torturing aftermath of bad water he'd run onto half a day back, he faced the narrow crooked gut of street with baleful red-rimmed eyes.

He spat. The foulness remained in his throat and he swore, damning a fool who would ride half a thousand miles to peddle his gun and then kill himself on bad water when within sight of town.

Adobe hovels rimmed the street, giving way finally to a long stretch of high false-fronted frame structures and squat brick business buildings. Dust stirred by a constant flow of riders and wheeled traffic hung like film before Bowers's eyes, roseate where a blood-red sunset slanted sharp blades of light between the saloon fronts. Men milled along the walks, horses choked the hitch-rails. A pulse beat of gold-fevered excitement emanated from them and beat against Bowers with formless pressures.

But Bowers was without eye or appreciation for the garish exuberance and raw beauty of the boom town. Each grave he'd filled, every bullet-shattered hope along his backtrail now sent its emissary to ride pace with him. Animosities then beaten back but now refreshed—possibly alined with newer hatreds—waited for him to relax and to forget. Men beaten, men friends or kin to other men dead—ever the horde grew and pressed closer

with its uncertainty, its waiting, its vengeance from a gun he'd overlooked.

A man lived by killing, died by relaxing. Browers knew that with an aching weariness. He tugged his dusty hat brim lower across his face and kept a glance prowling along the shadowed walks. And, one by one, he picked them out—men of saddle, and of gun, and that curious edged vigilance which marked them for fellow gunmen here for the kill.

Red Struthers lifted a wave to which Bowers canted his head noncommittally. Farther along with Parsons, bony-faced Clyde Clawitter, the tall, ghoulish Templeton. Then Ike Rambler, whom he saw, met glances with, and rode past without show of recognition moving either of them.

WHOEVER was building this gun army was getting the cream. The fatigue began sloughing away from Bowers and he straightened in saddle. Momentarily he wished that he had made some inquiries when first he'd learned of the need for gunmen at Broken Spur. Then the moment passed and he knew that it wouldn't have mattered. He'd have come regardless.

An ear attuned can catch the sibilant whisper of gun call across mountain jumble or desert waste. He had heard in Keya Paha, restlessness had hurried his saddling. The particulars he would learn as he went along. Or so he figured as he eyed this little town whose streets crawled with gunmen and whose life blood was bawdy with riches of gold pouring from newly opened mines, and from the cattle range which stretched endlessly northward and eastward.

On the corner was a building of raw new brick. A window bore the legend:

BROKEN SPUR EXPRESS

A short, thick-necked man stood watching, a stubby chewed length of toothpick caught in his fleshy lips. Light glinted from a nickeled badge.

Bowers reined toward the man, stopping only when his mount was within arm's length of the deputy.

"I'm a stranger here," Bowers said. "If you could recommend a clean respectable place for a man to stay—"

The deputy caught his mockery and his face changed. He appraised Bowers with a swift glance, looked behind him along the street, then faced him directly.

"If you leave that gun in your warsack, Mrs. Ivers has a place," the deputy said. "She's not looking for hardcases."

"Oh!" Bowers shifted in saddle. He rubbed his jaw reflectively. "Maybe if I shave first?"

The deputy eyed him without smiling. "Mister, I think you'd better—" He let the words dwindle, restraint visible in his face.

A door behind him opened to a tall, long-legged man wearing a town coat and dark cravat. The coat was unbuttoned to reveal a low slung holster and, too, bore its nickeled shield.

"Strommer, I—" The stranger glanced curiously at Bowers. His eyes changed and he leaped forward. "Blue, you old son-of-a-gun!"

Blue Bowers stared, for a time numbed and unbelieving.

A curious thing this split which allows part of a man to stretch a slow, glad smile while the other part curses and shrivels back with a sinking, trapped feeling. A gush of happiness like foam covering a current of hapless mudded anguish. Blue Bowers shook his head.

"Ten minutes in town and already the law makes a grab for me," he complained. Then he was swinging down from saddle and slapping the long-legged man on the back. "John! What are you doing here with a lawman badge on your coat?"

"Strommer, this is my brother Blue," the long-legged man said. "You've heard of him. Maybe some of it bad. But for anything on the black side of the ledger, I can list half a dozen on the right."

The deputy hesitated. Remembering, Blue Bowers thought, and he shoved out his hand, forcing the issue.

"Glad to know you, Strommer."

The deputy shook hands, flushed and uncertain in this abrupt roundabout face.

His fingers took on pressure. He showed square white teeth in a grin and put meaning in the last grip of his hand.

"Wait until I tell Adeline," John Bowers said. "She's heard me brag about you so much."

"Adeline?"

"My wife. Didn't you know? I wrote you last year, sent the letter to Pawnee Gap." John Bowers flung a quick, searching glance at his brother's eyes. "Let's have a drink, Blue," he invited. "How'd you happen to drift down here anyway?"

"My horse safe on the street?"

John Bowers grinned. But it was a shallow grin, and when it faded, his face showed strong lines.

"As long as Strommer is here to watch it," he said.

His glance left Blue's face to go searching along the street in the incessant vigilance which means the difference between life and death to a frontier town marshal.

Blue enquired softly, "It's that bad?"

JOHN BOWERS eyed him and, for a breath, there was that cold wedge between them. "Isn't that why you came?" Then John laughed, roughed Blue's shoulder with his fist, and tried to rebury the thing that had come to light. He said, "Let's have that drink. It's been a long time since the Bowers boys split a bottle."

The surface of Blue agreed, "A long time at that, John." But underneath, Blue Bowers was wondering how long the pressure had been too much for his brother, how long it had been wearing nerves which could not stand wear without weakening and betraying their owner.

John Bowers was taking things too deeply, letting them get in where they festered, made him taut. Time was no longer his friend, but an enemy rasping and fraying at his control. Where cool judgment and patience would be needed, he would not have it. And then would come the kill. From long experience Blue Bowers knew that attrition was not wholly an Indian's game.

The deputy, Strommer, said, "Well, guess I'd better stroll around a bit. See you later."

He nodded solemnly at Blue, hesitated to see if John had any suggestions, and then turned away—a compact, hard-muscled man. Stolid and unimaginative and, because of it, peculiarly insulated against the uncertainty which is a lawman's most dangerous adversary.

Blue Bowers watched after him. Maybe capable enough to handle a drunken waddy or hard rock miner, he reflected. But what would he do against Ike Rambler, or Parsons, or Clawitter?

The speculation chilled him. He turned to find John also looking down the street. But with a far-seeing harshness as though he were looking not at the false fronts of saloons and gambling dens but behind them, into the sly malicious scheming which was working to destroy him.

A gunshot came from somewhere across town. The sound brought John Bowers wheeling around, his nostrils flaring. Then he stopped. He raised a hand whose fingers trembled to rub the back of his neck.

Not looking at Blue, he said, "Probably somebody target shooting at bottles again. Or somebody claiming he saw a rat. Night and day here, there, always hurrying to find nothing."

Blue Bowers thought, *And your nerves are cracking under it. You're losing control of the town—which is what they're after.*

Aloud he said, "You got 'em worried, John, or they wouldn't be heckling you. Just sit tight and make them come to you."

"If only they would! One at a time or all at once. Just so a man could look down the street and see what he had to face."

Again there was sound of a single gunshot. But this time from a sun-bleached jumble of rocks and stone outcroppings that marked beginning of the badlands.

John Bowers's voice was blunt as he said, "I'll be seeing you, Blue." He began pacing along the walk.

"Get your deputy to back you, John," Blue called.

"It's my job."

Blue fell silent. Anger and pride were

sending John along that walk, driving him on a fruitless quest the very failure of which would add to that anger and that pride. Until one day there would be somebody waiting for him, and it would be over.

Words came into Blue's throat. Swear words. It wasn't the badge on John's coat, but the blood in his veins. The blood of a brother which would have to be spilled before Parsons, and Red Struthers, and Clawitter could feel free in town.

Strommer was not in sight. Across the street, Red Struthers leaned indolently against a wooden awning post and loafed. Blue studied him for a moment. Struthers was too casual.

A building certainty brought Blue Bowers around. Ike Rambler was no longer on the street. Nor were the nondescript hangers-on in front of the Ace of Hearts Saloon, or the Adobe, or the Frontier Saloon, as numerous as they had been.

Turning, Blue stepped back into saddle and reined his mount around. John was already fifty yards down the street. Blue lifted his horse to a canter, holding to the street center, slowing when he came abreast of John. He did not look at his brother.

STRUTHERS had shifted his attention. Blue reined in toward him. Struthers had been rolling a cigarette. He finished the job, licking the paper sealed with slow deliberation, then shoved it unlighted into the corner of his wide, flat mouth.

"You get around, Bowers."

Blue Bowers laughed. "Somebody always sees to that, Red." He dismounted and ducked under the hitch-rail beside the red-headed killer.

Struthers's glance flicked across the street, and he grinned. "A drink, Blue?"

Blue wagged his head, smiling nastily, showing Red that he was onto the game and defying him to argue.

"In a minute, Red. This is a new town to me. I want to see how it operates."

Deputy Strommer rounded the next corner down, saw John Bowers approaching, and stopped. The two men stood conferring for a time. Then both turned back into the side street from which Strommer had come.

"We'll have that drink, Red," Blue Bowers said.

Struthers did not answer. When he turned toward the saloon door his smile was gone.

CHAPTER II

"Crawl to Me!"

THE Ace of Hearts was a plushy place. Wide and deep, with sixty feet of polished bar, fancy prism'd chandeliers, and probably twenty or thirty tables scattered along one wall. Two sets of double doors gave into the place. Opposite was a wide stage, now empty. The roulette wheel and chuck-a-luck stands were draped in white dust covers, while three swampers worked their mops over the floor.

Blue pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. More than the paltry wages of thirsty cowhands had gone into this place. Maybe even more than the wages of miners who dug gold ore from the half-dozen going mines north of town. Syndicate outfits, employing their men in shifts, at set wages. But Blue doubted that these wages were enough to keep the Ace of Hearts going.

Struthers led the way to the bar, nodded curtly at the bartender, and swung around to hook his elbows atop the mahogany.

"Figure to stay long?" he asked bluntly.

Blue shrugged, and watched the man, and wondered what was building the tension in him.

"Depends," he answered easily. "How do things shape up?"

Struthers looked at him. Then looked away. The fine muscles under his skin were drawn so that the flesh seemed stony and hard.

"I didn't know you was kin to a lawman," Struthers said finally.

Blue laughed. "Hell, there's been a time or two when I wore a law badge myself.

You knew that?"

Struthers did not answer. He looked at Blue, then looked away, staring blankly into distance while the pulse lifted in the big vein of his throat. And Blue Bowers used his left hand to lift the whisky glass from the bar.

There weren't more than eight or ten men in the room, not counting the swampers and bartenders. No tables were occupied. Blue let his glance soak into the backbar mirror and rove across the reflection. Directly overhead was a balustraded catwalk which connected the upstairs rooms in the front of the buildiing with those in the back. It was a feature of construction he had noted upon first entering the saloon, and did not show in the reflection.

Thinking of that catwalk gave Blue an itchy feeling. It was like riding into an ambush and knowing that it was there, yet being helpless to alter or change any aspect of it.

Most sound had died from the saloon. Blue watched Struthers with lazy indifference and waited, as Struthers was waiting.

Then a voice came from behind him. "That damned Bowers is getting too cocky. Somebody ought to fix his clock."

Struthers was still staring into distance. But with a glance that was sharp, and edgy, forcibly held away from Bowers. When Blue made no move, the voice continued, a little more shrilly loud:

"Thinks he's king-pin of the town, the low—"

Blue Bowers hunched his shoulders and shifted. With the first move, Red Struthers came around. There was a fleet instant of sharp surprise in Struthers's eyes when he found Blue facing him instead of turned toward the speaker. Then Bowers flipped his whisky into those widening eyes. Struthers's draw faltered as agony flamed across his face. He reeled back, and Blue rapped him across the temple with the barrel of his Remington pistol.

He wheeled then, the barrel swiveling and falling into line. Three men stared in frozen consternation at the gun and at the cold mirthless smiling of the man confronting them.

"You were saying something about Bowers," Blue clipped frigidly.

None spoke, none so much as breathed. Then a bulky thick-mustached man forced himself to move.

"What's it to you, stranger?"

Blue Bowers stared at the red-rimmed brown eyes, held his gaze until the man's nerve fluttered, and he looked away.

"You won't get away with it, Bowers," he whispered. "You shoot and—and—"

Blue Bowers's laugh mocked him. "And what, mister? I pour a slug into your belly and what?"

Sweat beaded the man's twitching face. He stared fixedly, making no answer.

They had depended upon Red Struthers to take Blue from behind. Only now Struthers was out of it. And Blue had the drop.

A WHIP-LASH of anger crackled in Blue Bowers's voice. "Then get down on your knees and ask me not to!" he said. "Get down, damn you! I want the story to spread across all this neck of country. I want everybody to know of it and talk of it. So that whenever you see another man you'll know that he is remembering how you crawled to a Bowers and begged!"

The mustached man paled so that the whisky veins of his nose and cheeks flamed like livid threads. His nostrils were white-edged. Panic lay close to the surface of his voice as he cried:

"No! By hell, no!"

The other two were still numbed, but Blue knew that another dozen heart-beats of time would shatter the spell and send them plunging into action. No man could crawl and ever again hold up his head. Especially no man of the gun-breed, disdainful of scruples but placing inordinate value on nerve and pride and a reputation for toughness.

The mustached man took a short, jerky step away from the bar, his eyes bulged and haunted, but showing no intention of crawling. Each second stretched, and

frayed, and ticked away—and left a void over which they hung suspended.

Then a woman's voice called down from the catwalk, incongruous in this poised timelessness. Creating a compelling urge for a man to shift, and look up, and break the shackles. And he dared not.

"Go get 'em, buckeroo!" the woman called. "Eat 'em up for breakfast! Try the barkeep for desert!"

"Be quiet, Lilly," a man protested quietly. "Mr. Bowers is having his little joke. Do not interfere."

The man's voice, too, came from the catwalk overhead, and Blue Bowers knew that it signalled end to the tableau.

The mustached man turned away. He placed both palms flat on the bar and slumped against his stiffened arms, too spent to move. Behind him, the other two glared wordless hatred at Bowers. One bent to murmur to the mustached man, got no answer, and lifted his head to glare again.

Bowers stepped back, holstering his gun. The woman was leaning over the balustrade—a luxuriant blonde woman, flushed and startlingly beautiful. Her soft red lips were open to show white teeth. Her eyes sparkled even in the dim light of the room.

Beside her was a short, paunchy man in a soft shirt and bright red elastic sleeve holders. Instinctive caution held this man back so that only the outer rim of his belly and the upper portion of his face showed above the catwalk flooring.

Blue Bowers eyed the two, and waited, and knew that the gun trap he had spoiled had been known to both of them from the beginning.

"I'll buy you a drink, cowboy," the blonde woman said. She laughed down at him with provocative invitation and waited for his reaction.

"Lilly!" the paunchy man protested. "Don't—"

But the woman turned away from him and moved along the catwalk toward the rear where an open stairway led down to the main floor. He leaned over the balustrade.

"See to Struthers, Hamilton," he directed one of the bartenders. Then he was regarding Blue Bowers and laughing a silent, coyote's laugh that revealed his back teeth, and was completely soundless. "What was this all about, Bowers? You know the city marshal doesn't allow shooting trouble in Broken Spur. You could have got me in trouble with the law."

Bowers nudged Red Struthers's limp form with a boot toe. "He took me for a fool, too."

The paunchy man chuckled.

"Come on up when Lilly gets done with you," he invited. "I got a bottle in my desk that beats this belly wash we shove over the bar."

"And maybe Ike Rambler behind the door?"

The paunchy man's face changed and for a second was devoid of the good humor he feigned. Then he was laughing again, and showing tobacco-yellowed back teeth, and making no sound. He shrugged and turned away.

THE barkeep, Hamilton, came around the end of the bar with a pail of water and a rag. He began sopping at the crimson which seeped from the blue-red ridge that bulged from the side of Struthers's head.

"Dump that pail in his face," Bowers advised. "He'll come out of it."

"We'd have to mop again." The barkeep kept sopping with his wet rag.

The woman came across the floor and stopped in front of Blue. She looked into his eyes, smiling, and gave no notice to Struthers, sprawled almost underfoot.

"I'm Lilly Belle," she said softly. "This time I'm breaking precedent and doing the buying. The first one, anyhow."

It was a macabre touch, yet the loveliness of the woman was such that Bowers felt himself lifted up by a wave of recklessness. He said, "There'll be more than one?"

Her eyes answered, and her sultry smile, and the subtle, provocative way in which she swayed toward him until her full breasts were touching his arm.

Desire came into Bowers like a flame blown white-hot. A damnable urging he fought to control. He let his glance reach deep, sent it probing into her eyes, answering promise with promise, and knew that whatever else Broken Spur might hold for him, this much he would have.

He answered his own question, "There'll be more." And laughed at what he saw in her glance.

She smiled secretively. "Kinkead won't like it."

"Kinkead?"

"Up there." She gestured toward the upstairs rooms where the paunchy man had disappeared.

to be too big before long!"

Sly-laughing, coyotey Kinkead! Not yet big, but scheming to change that. And John Bowers, a lawman, strongly alive. And that, too, to be changed by Kinkead's scheming.

Even as Blue watched the woman move along the catwalk, his thoughts encompassed the tangents represented by Kinkead and John Bowers, and brought them into a picture that emerged as clear-etched and sharp as though the situation had been explained to him in detail.

Men of Kinkead's ambition he had seen before. The riches of a mining town, or wide-open cattle trail terminus, fevering

HOTTER'N HELL

EARLY-DAY travelers through the Yuma country of southwestern Arizona were appalled by the burning summer heat encountered in this area. One man told about the tough cowboy of the area who died and went promptly to hell because of his great wickedness. After only a short time below, he sent back for his blankets.

—Gene Olson

Bowers laughed depreciatively. "To hell with Kinkead."

"No." She shook her head, and Bowers was surprised to see that Lilly Belle was drunk. She repeated, "No. Kinkead is going to be too big before long to be brushed aside like that. We'll have to be careful. We can't just—"

She shook her head. Then, as though becoming aware of the listening bartender, and the men along the bar, she shook her head again, looked at him with eyes gone wide and frightened, and turned away.

Bowers watched her cross the saloon and ascend the stairs. Slim silken ankles flashed below the white lace edging of petticoats. He could see the fluid lift and thrust of her rounded thighs as she went from step to step. His desire was whetted, lifting in his mind to clash with words that whimpered there like echoes of an aged old whispering, "Kinkead is going

judgment and propagating greed until a share wasn't enough. Then it was crowd, and fight, and encroach, until a town had to fight back or succumb. The gun call going out—

Bowers's mouth twitched as he thought back across the long miles of riding he had done in answering this one. Miles of anticipation, never dreaming that Broken Spur would be different from any one of a dozen other towns he'd helped gun into line. Live rich, live fast, die young.

But now—difference. Pickings of this rich little gold town were not for him. Not when his brother was wearing a law badge.

The fact was hammered home to him ever more forcibly as he watched Lilly Belle.

When she reached the head end of the catwalk, he called, "You forgot that drink!" but knew she would not turn. Nor did she.

A door opened, closed behind her, and he was shut out. All that she symbolized —the rich living, the easy, lush satiation of appetite and yearning, the reckless irresponsibility of taking what you wanted when you wanted it—was closed away from him.

CHAPTER III

Lawman Bait

WITH antagonism burning in his eyes, Bowers turned. The mustached man was still huddled in silent misery with his two deflated cronies. The barkeep dabbed at Struthers's lacerated head and kept his own face averted.

Bowers snorted. He pursed his lips and spat on the floor, hoping that someone would object. Wanting an excuse to break the stagnating crust of anger which fumed without focus or object. When nobody rose to the challenge, he snorted again and wheeled, heading toward the street door.

He was not quite there when the slatted panels flipped open and John Bowers stood framed in the opening.

"You damned fool!" Blue snapped testily. "That's a heroic pose, but it makes you target for every gun in the place. Either stay out or come in fast and move aside until you know what you face."

John looked at him, and away, and saw Struthers stretched out in front of the bar. His eyes hardened.

"Trouble?" he asked.

No one answered. John's eyes sparkled with a growing anger, and he took two steps into the place. Blue held out a restraining hand.

"No trouble, John. Red just ran head-on unto a wall he hadn't figured was there. He ain't dead."

John shrugged off Blue's hand. "There'll be no trouble in Broken Spur!" he said flatly. "Anybody flashes a gun, he gets ten days in jail and then an escort to the city limits and a warning not to come back. That goes for everybody. No exceptions."

For a moment Blue was tempted to laugh. Then the impulse faded and he felt pity for his brother. John was trying too hard. He was bearing down on the little things in an effort to break the spirit of the gunnies loafing in the streets, but the result was a slow, not yet manifest breaking of the lawman instead.

He shoved past his brother, then stopped in the doorway and said, "You coming, John? Or you got business here?"

John hesitated momentarily, then wheeled to follow Blue outside.

The silence between them was a weighted thing, and Blue stared off across the adobe brick and clapboard buildings of the town toward the far-lifting tawny hills. Somewhere a steam whistle was raking raw surging sound across the sky. Probably from the gold mines north of town, or maybe from the stamp mill.

John stirred beside him. "I didn't mean to rake you in there, Blue," he said slowly. "But I wasn't lying, either."

Blue made no effort to answer. John did not need to warn him. Any time he needed a gun in his fist, he was going to drag it. And to hell with John Bowers's town law.

Anger built in him and burned to the surface, sending raw swear words into his throat. The town swarming with gunnies and John pussyfooting around like a damned fool, warning them, "Be good boys now, fellers, or I'll paddle your rumps." As though Rambler, or Struthers, or Clawitter, understood anything but hot lead!

The thing to do was catch them one by one. Trump up a charge; pistol-whip the arrogance out of them. Gut-shoot whichever one dared stand on his hind legs and argue. What a man knew in his mind needn't be proved. And a man knew that those gununies had it coming. Put the fear of hell in them and let Kinkead do his crying.

He'd had as rough a set-up to buck that time in Belmont, and he'd cracked it. A cannister of fused black powder rolled

into the beer cellar under the floor had brought their dive down around their ears. Sitting back in the shadows with a rifle potting at them as they crawled clear of the flaming wreckage had broken it. The hardcases who had survived had been glad to climb their broncs and light a shuck out.

Remembering brought a comparison with his brother's futile efforts and Blue scowled.

"You saw Kinkead?"

BLUE turned to find John studying him narrowly. The uncertainty in John's face nettled him. He nodded brusquely.

"You going to work for him?"

"No!"

"But that's why you came to Broken Spur, isn't it?"

Blue twisted to face his lawman brother across a twenty-inch interval of space and a thousand years of man-killing experience.

"Yeah, I did," he said harshly. "I left Abilene and was at short ends. A drifter told me that a man with gun savvy could make a good thing of it in Broken Spur, so I headed down this way."

"And found me," John said with unexpected gentleness. "Your brother wearing a lawman badge. And that spoiled the set-up. Red Struthers, Rambler, the Pecos Kid, Templeton—they could all drift in and start licking gravy at Kinkead's table. But you got trapped."

John's understanding broke Blue's ire. He started at his brother, searching for condemnation, and found none.

"I figured it was two outfits gunning for control down here," Blue admitted. "I didn't know it was the law being taken."

It was the wrong thing to say. John Bowers's face tightened.

"What's Kinkead waiting on?" Blue asked bluntly. "Why hasn't he just killed you and had it over with?"

The question startled John so that his eyes widened and a flush lifted across his jaws.

"That's a hell of a thing to ask!"

"Try answering it once," Blue snapped. "I've seen a dozen men in town who'd do it for a fistful of pesos and a jug of mescal. You are wide open for it—you and Strommer both. You're just standing around waiting for it. They figure on beefing you, and you know it. And yet you don't make any effort to fight back."

For a long, cold minute they stood with glances locked. Then the belligerence ebbed from the lawman's eyes, and he looked away.

"I don't know," he said. "I've wondered that, too." He scowled and turned to stare back down the street. "Kinkead's got a strangle-hold on two-thirds of the saloons and gambling houses in this town. He's got a wolf pack of gunnies mean enough to fight an army."

John's glance came up then, and it sparkled hot with anger. "I tell you, Blue, Kinkead's got this whole country in his vest pocket. Wells Fargo is crying to high heaven about the way their stages are being knocked off. Mason Tomelmyer of the Gold Eagle Syndicate can't even send an ounce of gold without a thirty-man escort guarding it every foot of the way. What with cattle rustling, robbing, and killing, there's a fortune of stolen money coming into Broken Spur every week, and Kinkead gets it."

Blue Bowers only half-listened to his brother's words. The tones told him the desperation of the situation. Kinkead big, Kinkead bad—and a lawman walking his lonely beat with the terrible knowledge that at any hour of the day or night Kinkead had but to nod his head to send gunmen to erase even that small symbol of justice and law.

"John, I—" Blue said, and then noticed that John was watching a stubby, barrel-chested man approach along the walk.

Prosperity marked the man's striped trousers, the self-conscious stiffness with which he toyed with a heavy gold watch chain that spanned his spacious middle. He stopped as he reached them.

"We considered your recommendation, John," he said. "We think that it is a good one, if—"

"My brother, Blue Bowers," John said. "Blue, this is Abram Steen. He's on the town council—runs the Steen Mercantile and Grocery."

Steen nodded, said a perfunctory "Glad to know you," and took off his stiff, narrow-brimmed hat. He wiped at a shiny bald pate with his palm.

He asked soberly, "Can you enforce it, John?"

John Bowers nodded.

Steen turned to Blue. "John thinks that everyone should check his gun while in town. We passed the ordinance. The printer will have the posters ready some time this evening."

"I'll have them up and the law in effect by midnight," John promised grimly.

Blue pursed his lips, less certain of that promise. The ordinance, if enforced, would cripple Kinkead. For men of Rambler's, or Red Struthers's, or Parsons's stripe would gravitate elsewhere rather than be shorn of their guns. John had been shrewd enough to see that.

And so would Kinkead.

The same doubt must have touched Steen, for he said, "Maybe we ought to wait a few days on this, John. I'll send word to Colonel Watling and get the Army down here."

"No!" John shook his head. "It's my job to handle. I'll handle it."

Blue turned to look back along the street. Deputy Strommer was about fifty yards back, coming toward them. And behind Strommer, leaning indolently against an awning post, his face puckered and unreadable in the shadow of his hat brim —Ike Rambler.

CHAPTER IV

Too Proud to Fight!

ADELINE BOWERS was tall and slender, with a rounded-chin face and wide, smiling mouth. She gripped hands like a man when John introduced Blue to her. Her teeth were perfect and Blue found himself smiling appreciatively.

He murmured, "Nice." And then flushed guiltily.

John Bowers laughed. "Consider yourself complimented, Addie. Coming from Blue, that 'nice' means something special. He's a connoisseur of women, and has a way with them."

Amusement bubbled into her eyes, and Blue felt his flush deepen. "They have a way with me," he said defensively. "I—" The words got tangled up so that he sounded like a flustered kid.

John was laughing, and Blue glowered at him. Why was truth spoken in jest always laughed at? Blue knew that women had led him by a ring in the nose since he'd been on the tender side of nineteen. Before he even got mixed up with one, and afterward, he realized how potent a force they were in upsetting his sense of values. Let desire for a woman get in his blood and he—

He shook his head, swearing inwardly at his jackass of a brother who stood laughing at his discomfiture.

Adeline came to his rescue, handing over clean towels and a bar of soap. The men stepped to the back porch to wash. The sun was far down, a mucky gray ash of afterlight casting shadow and filling them with pooled blackness across the yard and beneath the fences. John scanned the ocotillo fence, the rubble of a neighbor's yard, the shed and pole corrals farther back. Only after satisfying himself that all was as it appeared to be did he turn his back and bend to wash his face.

The call came before the meal was finished. A tousel-headed, raisin-eyed little muchacho came to the door and called out in sing-song patter:

"Come to Doctair Moosica, *muy pronto. El hombre est muerto.* Please to come, Doctor Moosica, he say."

John Bowers lay down his knife and fork. "Stay and finish, Blue," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I can." He smiled apologetically at Adeline, patted her hand, and left the table.

"I'm practically a widow, now that John

has this town marshal job," Adeline said to Blue after John had gone.

Blue agreed. Then the darker aspects of what she had said caught him, and he raised his eyes to see the same sudden realization clouding her gaze. She blinked rapidly to fight back the tears, trying to smile. Then she stopped pretending.

"I—I'm afraid for him, Blue," she whispered.

It was a feeling he could understand. "The roughest part is the waiting," he agreed. "And that's the part that falls on a lawman's family. The waiting and the fearing."

He tried to ease her doubts by a show of casual unconcern. He speared a hot biscuit and watched butter soak into it like spilled water into thirsty desert sands. He ate stolidly, mechanically, giving no evidence of being aware that she was watching him.

"John can't swing this alone, can he?" she asked after awhile.

Blue finished the biscuit and took his time. But she knew the answer as well as he, knew it with the same preternatural foreboding. He shook his head.

"I don't think so."

The woman paled. "He won't let them call in the Army. He's too proud. He took the job and he's bound to fight it through on his own. He thinks Kinkead won't dare have him killed because another marshal being killed *would* bring in the Army, and that would ruin everything for Kinkead. But—but, if John should be killed in a fair gunfight—"

Blue looked at her, seeing the wide, haunted eyes, the soft mouth now twisted with anguish and fear. He shook his head.

"Make him quit, Adeline. Make him give it up and go to work at something else. I know this work and the men he's going against. He hasn't the chance of a dewdrop in hell. They'll keep riding him until his nerve goes, then they'll kill him in a fracas that he has started himself. All the Army troops west of the river won't be able to hurt Kinkead if he can show that John started it."

"And you won't side him?"

BLUE BOWERS stared. She was searching his face, watching and waiting with an almost pathetic hopefulness. *Damn a brother who will string her a bunch of tall tales until she thinks a man can whip a guncrew single-handed,* he thought. The appetite went out of him, and he scowled as he slowly laid his knife and fork aside.

"I can help, maybe," he said slowly. "But how much good I can do—"

"Oh, would you?"

She was on her feet. Before Blue knew what was happening, she had thrown her arms about him and was kissing him gratefully.

Embarrassed, he started to push her away. The soft clean smell of her hair came to his nostrils, the warmth and resilience of her body against his. For an instant the old wildness surged into his blood and he lifted his arms—and saw deputy Strommer standing in the open doorway.

Strommer's face went red, then white. He turned away stiffly. Blue wrenched himself free.

"Wait, Strommer!" he called. "You don't understand!"

Adeline flushed. "Blue just said he'd take a deputy job to help John," she said. "I—I was so grateful."

Strommer said nothing. His very silence was accusation and Blue grabbed his sombrero, pushing past the deputy and on outside. Strommer turned away.

When clear of the house, Strommer stopped.

"I heard about you," he said flatly. "I didn't let on to John, but I heard—that Calworthy girl you got tangled up with in Pawnee Gap. Then that mess when you was shotgun guard for Pebbleson Stage Lines. And that deal at Mesa City."

Blue stirred angrily. "It's not like that, Strommer. Believe good of Adeline if you won't of me. She's too decent—"

"She's decent," Strommer agreed. And his anger grew greater. "Get out of town, Blue Bowers! John don't need your help bad enough to keep you around. Get out of town or, so help me God, I'll find some

way to kill you!"

Strommer's very seriousness in making the threat made it all the more ridiculous. Blue Bowers laughed, then twitched his hand, and a gun glimmered black and cold in the evening darkness.

Strommer stared woodenly, unfrightened, and—Blue sensed—unimpressed.

"Shoot now, if you're going to," Strommer said hoarsely. "Because when my time comes, it'll be different."

Blue swore and sheathed the gun with a savage jab. Strommer had a right to judgment. The stories told of Blue Bowers and his women weren't the type to entertain kids. He'd been tangled with women and plenty. What John had jocularly referred to as his "way with women" was, in truth, a structural weakness which Blue had cursed and damned but had never been able to overcome. A pretty woman could subdue him where all the gunnies between St. Louis and California could only shoot and be shot.

But Adeline—Strommer had no call to believe that of her. Like she was in the same class as that Lilly Belle of Kinkead's. The very impulsiveness of Adeline's action was evidence of her innocence. And, knowing it, Blue Bowers swore at Strommer for a dirty-minded gossip.

Ahead, the lights of Pinchot Avenue made the night a darker hue. Blue walked slowly, bitterly wrapped in thought, and anger until the main street of Broken Spur lay before him. A shifting orange haze compounded of glassed-in window lights and open pitch flares made uncertain illumination along the street.

Pausing to roll a smoke, Blue saw John and a small, heavily bearded man standing a block down the street talking heatedly. Then he saw Strommer, watching from a doorway. He eyed the deputy, staring with a dislike that sharpened and smoked its tension between them. Strommer moved out onto the walk, then turned slowly to begin walking toward John.

THIS whole deal had soured for Blue. From the outset, he had been beat. Now he was hanging around when the only future he could look forward to was a shot in the back from one of Kinkead's gunnies, or an equally lethal gun blast from deputy Strommer. A smart man would climb his bronc and light out pronto. The gunshot that came then was sharp. So close that Blue Bowers crouched down and dug his own iron free. A man yelled, then there was a fast scurrying for shelter as the street cleared.

Blue saw Strommer on his knees, twisting to look back at him, an agonized disbelief making a grotesque mask of his face. The deputy pawed feebly at the gun still holstered at his side, then pitched forward.

But Blue had only an instant's time for watching. He had caught the sharp click of a gun hammer coming back to full cock —close. He whirled, searching the dingy recesses of doorways, the dark black slots between buildings.

Adobe dust exploded from the wall beside him, but this time he had marked the muzzle flash. Thumbing a quick shot at the dark gap where a grocery store and a leather goods store failed to join, he leaped toward it. A single glance across his shoulder showed him John was coming up the street at a run. Then Blue was turning his full attention upon the ambush killer ahead.

The dark between the two buildings was blinding. Blue triggered a waist-high shot down the recess, then another a foot lower. Repercussion beat against his ears. But there was no return shot and he knew that whoever had fired was now fleeing. He plunged into the recess in pursuit of the fugitive.

Behind the buildings was a littered alley. Strong ammonia stench told him of horse barns somewhere close. He felt the biting rot of kitchen refuse thrown upon the ground. But there was no sign of the pursued.

Blue stopped, listening carefully. From the street side of the buildings he caught a rising murmur of men talking, a ragged yelling that ebbed and fell, only to rise up again. But here, in this deserted and empty alley, all was quiet.

Tin cans clattered to his right and he whirled, the Remington palmed and ready. For a time he could see nothing. He began moving cautiously, swinging a wide arc that carried him out away from the buildings.

And then he saw a silhouette cross a dim orange blot of unshaded window The man was gone before Blue could cry out or fire. Blue moved even farther out, hurrying now, cold and grim with the knowledge of how this deadly game of man hunting must go. Ahead were two windows set side by side. He watched them, waiting to catch the silhouette again.

A horse snorted suddenly near him and thrust itself against corral poles. Blue Bowers started, then crouched, cursing the animal. He watched the windows. The man had had time to reach them. But there was no silhouette, no shadow, and he realized that the fellow had taken alarm and was playing it cagey.

Feeling his way cautiously a step at a time, Bowers began moving along the darkened alley. His probing boot toe touched a trash pile and he stopped. The noise from the street had died away so that an almost preternatural quietude gripped the town. Behind him the horse was still snorting and plunging. Bowers bent low. He lifted a bottle from the trash pile and threw it straight ahead of him. The bottle clattered against metal and set up a series of scratching rattling sounds.

The ruse drew no fire.

With growing certainty that he had been eluded, Blue moved ahead again, walking slowly, gun ready, until the alley ended and a vague grayish side street opened before him. To his right was the glow and garish bustle of Pinchot Avenue intersecting the unlighted side street. To his left stretched emptiness with here and there a scattered house light.

While he stood looking, a curtained buggy came from the darkness and crossed before him. He could make out the dim bulk of a driver and, without further thinking, he plunged into the street. His boot toe caught the iron stirrup catapulting him into the darkened buggy. The sixgun was lifted.

A WOMAN screamed with a shrill, tinny voice, and Blue choked off the sound with his hand across her mouth.

"You see anybody run out of this alley?" he questioned harshly. "You seen anybody running down the street there?"

The woman struggled against him, twisting to gouge at his face with her nails, lifting a knee to drive it into his belly. He wrestled her back ruthlessly.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed. "There's a man bad shot. All hell is about to break loose and you act like — like. Quit fighting and I'll turn you loose. Talk is all I want out of you."

Slowly the woman's arched back lowered. She sagged in compliance and Blue Bowers removed his palm from her mouth. He peered at her in the dim light, heard the lift and pull of her struggle for breath. And then he knew, and swore savagely.

"Lilly Belle!"

She did not answer. Blue jerked at the reins, stopping the horse which pulled the rig. Whoever had shot Strommer had made his getaway. Blue knew that now, and the realization twisted a perverse anger within him. He turned, shoving his face within inches of the woman's.

"What're you doing here just now?" he snarled. "A man tries a backshot at me, hightails up this alley, and here you come moseying along all innocence!"

""I—I was just driving," Lilly Belle said. "Kinkkead has promised me a new house up on the north end. I like to go up there and look around. We—"

"The north end! That's up near where John lives. What'd a skunk like Kinkead be doing with a house in the decent part of town?"

Lilly Belle tossed her head. She had got over her first start of fear and was becoming more defiant.

"They'll be proud to call him neighbor," she said haughtily. "They'll be licking his boots. And then we'll show them!"

"And you didn't know anything about this shooting?" Blue jeered.

"No. Of course not."

He couldn't see well enough to tell anything by her face. Her words meant nothing. She was Kinkead's woman. And Kinkead would be behind the whole deal. Shoot Strommer, shoot John Bower's brother. Then, when the lawman lost control and came after them, they could kill him in plain self-defense. Or, if John Bowers did not come, they would know him cowed and too uncertain to be any further threat.

Full implications of the scheme stared at Bowers in emblazoned letters. He swore, grasping the blonde woman's arm in the intensity of his helplessness to alter or change the situation. John would go gunning now, and John would die.

"Damn you!" he said huskily to Lilly Belle.

She came against him with a readiness that was startling. He twisted, looking at her.

"This isn't —" And then a pinched ragged laugh escaped him.

Why not? John could look after Strommer, calling either a doctor or an undertaker. The gunny had escaped for now. Why not go ahead and—

Hauling the woman tight against him, Bowers turned the horse and started the buggy back into the darkness away from Pinchot Avenue.

CHAPTER V

Lilly Belle

HOURS slipped away and became lost. There was no town of Broken Spur, no brother marked for violent death, nor gunnies loafing and waiting with the intent patience of wolves ringing a maverick calf.

A man, a woman, and night's cloaking darkness. Blue Bowers cursed softly and raised his head when the sound of hoofbeats came to him. The night was far gone, Broken Spur hushed and uneasy.

The horseman came closer, seemed to see the buggy, and headed directly toward it at increased pace.

"Lilly," the man called guardedly. "Lilly Belle! Damn it, Kinkead wants you right away. He figured maybe you'd sneaked up here again."

Under Blue Bowers's prompting, Lilly Belle stirred sulkily. "Can't I even have a few minutes to myself without somebody bothering me? I'm all right. Tell Kinkead I'll be along later."

"Now," the horseman exclaimed in a brittle voice. "He's getting things ready for a showdown and wants you where he can watch over you. Strommer is dead. Bowers has deputized six men as special deputies. Right now they're combing the town cause they figure Bowers's brother beefed Strommer." The man laughed. "Seems Bowers's brother wasn't wasting no time. Strommer caught him and Bowers's wife together. After Struthers got Strommer, Strommer thought it was Bowers's brother that shot him and he told Bowers all about it. Bowers blew up, and Kinkead figures the time is ripe to break him wide open."

"You figure it, too, Pecos?" Blue Bowers queried from the shadows.

The rider stiffened. Then he broke, his hand flicking downward. Blue waited, his mouth tight and twisted in a snarl. The gun bucked in his fist, and the Pecos Kid reeled. For twenty yards he clung to the saddle before wilting and sliding free.

For a time Blue stood motionless, listening to the echoes ripple out over the town. John's special deputies would be investigating, he knew. And he cursed the damned fool Strommer who would think that he had shot him to close his mouth.

He turned suddenly. Lilly Belle was no longer close behind him. Then he saw her and he jabbed his sixgun into its holster and began running. When he caught her she fought, twisting and cursing, and smashing at his face with her fists. But he wrestled her down.

"Don't!" she pleaded. "I didn't know anything about it. I—I—"

"But you heard Pecos say that Red

Struthers beefed Strommer. I want you to tell John what you heard."

"No!"

"Yes, by hell! You'll tell him or I'll twist your arm into a bow knot and throttle you with it!"

She tried struggling again, but Blue was gripped by a ruthless savagery. He held her wrists and forced her along, walking beside her when she walked, walking behind and using his knee to force her along when she sulked.

Pinchot Avenue opened before them, still lighted and shimmering orange against the blackness of night. But strangely deserted. Blue could see almost a dozen blocks and nowhere did he see a single person.

"Where's the jail?" he queried.

Lilly Belle did not answer.

"Answer, damn you!" Blue growled. "Or I'll waltz you right down through the center of town. If any of John's deputies are all set for me, they might not worry too much about you being with me when they cut loose with those scatterguns."

"I—I'll show you," Lilly Belle conceded grudgingly. "Down two blocks, then west to the alley. It's a stone and adobe building." She spat at him then, mouthing obscenities that stripped all the veneer of femininity from her. "You won't keep me there!" she raged. "Kinkead'll get me out. He'll send half a dozen gunmen and they'll —"

"Break you out of jail?" Blue Bowers laughed mockingly. "I doubt it, honey. Breaking you out of jail would be hard to explain if the Army had to come in here to restore order. No. Kinkead'll keep playing it sly and make John rush him. He won't move into the open to rush John."

He gave her arm an extra twist as he propelled her toward the jail.

SHE did not answer, and Blue knew he had surmised correctly. Kinkead would wait and, by waiting, force John to expose himself.

He crossed Pinchot Avenue far up in the residential district, forcing Lilly Belle along. Then, a block west of Main Street, he began working down toward the jail.

It was empty, unlighted, and deserted. Searching a desk, Blue found a heavy ring with four keys and fitted one into the lock on a cell door. Shoving Lilly Belle inside, he turned the key.

"Behave yourself and you won't get hurt," he advised her. "Make a ruckus and — But you know better than that."

Shutting the front door closed off Lilly Belle's cursing and Blue stood for a moment listening to the night sounds of the town. He gave the key ring a flip, tossing the keys up on the flat roof. Then, hitching his guns to a more comfortable position, he headed down the street toward the Frontier Saloon, or the Ace of Hearts, wherever Kinkead's hired gunnies were waiting.

On the corner where the Broken Spur Express sign showed, two men stood holding shotguns. Both peered at him as he came into the street. Blue ignored them. But the rim of his eye caught the move as one of the men wheeled and hurried away.

Blue thought, *Going for John. They don't know me by sight. So they are going for John.*

He kept walking, rolling a cigarette which he shoved unlighted into his mouth. He wanted no smoke or coal glow in his eyes this night.

At the Ace of Hearts Saloon lights were aglow, both inside and outside. There was a subdued murmur of voices, but none of the hilarious gaiety to be expected of a boom-town saloon.

A voice called quietly from the shadows, "Easy, Blue. Just stand hitched."

Blue stopped. "I want to see Kinkead, Ike," he said carefully. "Lilly Belle is in jail. John knows I didn't beef Strommer, but he's mad as hell anyway. If Abram Steen calls the Army down here—"

"Army!" Ike Rambler's carefully controlled voice raised a pitch. "Why he—"

"Lilly Belle don't like being in jail."

Sweat slimed the palms of Blue's hands

as he waited for Rambler to feel through this new development. The Army moving in would clamp a steel lid on the town. Kinkead's careful plan for taking over would be gone with the echoes of the first cavalry bugle.

"Walk carefully, Blue," Ike Rambler said. "We'll go see Kinkead."

Through a saloon grown hushed and watchful, up the open stairway with a quarter of a hundred pairs of eyes boring into his back. Then the catwalk and gunmen watching him, wondering, bloodthirsty and edgy with the knowledge that tonight Kinkead was ending all semblance of law as a force to be reckoned with in Broken Spur.

Kinkead was sitting behind a polished desk, his big belly humped in his lap. He looked up as Blue Bowers pushed into the room. Then he saw Ike Rambler behind Blue and a sly, triumphant grin brought yellow tobacco-stained teeth into view.

"Your brother is a violent man, Mr. Bowers," Kinkead said silkily. "Six men with orders to shoot on sight if necessary. All of them hired just to bring you to justice. You must be a very wicked person."

Blue did not answer, and the sly grin slowly drained from Kinkead's face. His eyes flicked toward Rambler in mute question.

"He says Lilly Belle is in jail and that Steen is fetching in the Army," Ike Rambler said flatly. "That means Lilly Belle has talked. Damn it, Kinkead, why'd you have to tell a woman everything you know? John Bowers we could have handled, but the Army's damn different."

Kinkead's face went cold. All softness and fatty puffiness suddenly was transformed to hard lumps of muscle. He glared at Blue Bowers.

"I don't believe it!"

Blue shrugged. "John believed the Pecos Kid when the Kid told him about Red Struthers shooting Strommer in the back. Course, Pecos was dying when he talked, but John believed it."

KINKEAD stared at him, driving deep into his face with slitted malevolent eyes as though to force out the truth by sheer weight of hatred. Blue drew makings from his shirt pocket and began shaping a smoke with steady fingers.

"We can go ahead and finish that lawman," Ike Rambler suggested. "You can cook up a story."

"Not if the Army knows we forced the fight," Kinkead said heavily. "The whole thing turned on that one point—the law jumped us and we had to fight to protect ourselves. Not even a lawman can gun a man without legal reason. But if we beef him now, and Lilly Belle has told them anything, we're through."

Blue Bowers reached across Kinkead's desk and got a match. He snapped it alight, drew deeply on the cigarette, and calmly dropped the still flaming lucifer in Kinkead's paper-filled waste basket.

Flame sputtered, then caught, and began leaping. Kinkead's head snapped around. He swore and lunged toward the flaming basket. Blue Bowers twisted.

As he had hoped, Ike Rambler, supreme in his confidence, had not even bothered to draw his gun. Now Rambler's attention was drawn to the flame. When he became aware of Blue's move, he snapped around, whipping his hand down.

Even with the advantage, Blue found himself outclassed. He dragged his Remington out and up, saw Rambler's gun coming clear of leather, and triggered twice—desperately.

Shock came into Ike Rambler's eyes. He faltered, looked down unbelievingly at the gun gone dead in his hand. He tried to speak, then gave it up and fell with a curious wooden stiffness that jarred the room.

Kinkead had frozen, half bent over the flaming waste basket. Blue waggled the gun. When Kinkead straightened, Bowers toed the basket against the far wall, watching as the flame scorched the curtains, then began licking into them.

Kinkead's face was slimey with sweat. "We'll burn," he panted. "Blast it, man, let me put that out! We'll burn!"

Blue laughed and blew smoke from the muzzle of the Remington. The curtains had caught and were ablaze from floor to ceiling. Already the heat was making itself felt. Smoke and the acrid bite of fire acids ached in his lungs. Cracks in the tinder-dry clapboard walls sucked at the flame and drew it up between the walls. A reddish flickering light spread greater illumination than Kinkead's fancy globed lamp.

"We'll roast!" Kinkead wailed. "Let me get out of here! You crazy? We'll roast alive!"

Blue Bowers moved toward the window, an aperture framed in livid flame. He could look out and see dim figures moving along the street. A man yelled suddenly and gesticulated upward toward the window. Then Bowers saw that the man carried a shotgun.

Blue thought disgustedly, the damned fool will never learn. Kinkead's whole gun army downstairs waiting and he comes walking in the front door like he was going to a picnic.

Using the muzzle of his sixgun, Blue rapped the heat-stained glass from the window. He depressed the muzzle and fired. The shotgun carrier whirled and sprinted away. Another man lifted his shotgun, and Blue leaped back. Buckshot smashed the remaining glass of the window to splinters. The fresh air drove into the flames and sent them roaring and twisting up the wall and along the ceiling.

Men were shouting downstairs now. Blue Bowers stood listening calmly.

A fist beat at the door. "Kinkead! Kinkead! You all right? There's a hell of a lot of smoke out here!"

"Hey, Kinkead! Bowers has got his men ringing us in! You reckon we should sit tight or go after him!"

A chuckle broke from Blue Bowers's lips. He nodded at Kinkead. "Go advise your fighting crew, Kinkead."

FOR a moment Kinkead stared blankly. Then, with a squeal of animal fright, he whirled and scuttled toward the door.

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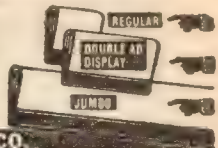

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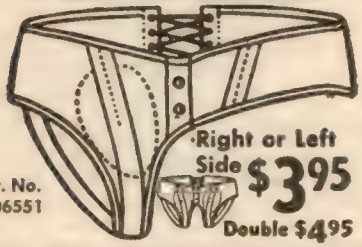

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He fumbled with the bolt, then flung the door wide.

Heat and smoke and gaudy fire glare poured against the men congregated outside. For half a second they stood frozen.

Then a man suddenly screamed "Fire!" and they whirled, breaking for the outside.

Blue couldn't stand the heat to get near the window now, but he triggered two shots anyway, tilting his gun and firing blindly toward the buildings on the opposite side of the street. Above the crackle of flame he heard a man yell. A gun boomed reply.

John's special deputies would be on edge now. Let Kinkead's crew come boiling out of the building and they'd run into a hail of gunfire.

Let them hole up inside and they'd be pretty sure to find the shirts scorched off their backs.

But a building didn't burn that fast, nor collapse so quickly even when burning. Blue Bowers gripped the Remington and moved along the catwalk and down the stairs. He crossed the saloon at a walk, slowing only momentarily when he saw Kinkead and Red Struthers both staring at him.

Struthers did not move after the black-blue dot appeared over his eye. Kinkead squeaked and whirled, running toward the far end of the building. Blue Bowers watched him go, then stepped to the back door and outside.

"I surrender, John!" he called, and pitched his gun toward the grim-faced lawman who stood in the fore of three shotgun-armed deputies. "We'll talk this out later. Right now get your sack ready. I think I've smoked out a nest of rats for you."

John Bowers grinned fleetingly. "Pick it up, Blue. When I finally got to talk to Adeline, she told me. Pick up that gun and get under cover. Six of us ain't going to hold Kinkead's bunch back unless you make up for what we lack."

Nodding, Blue Bowers got ready to make it up. ● ● ●

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linger along, to stop and graze or just rest.

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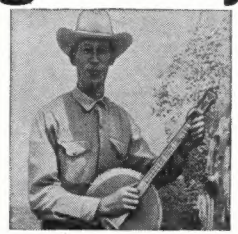

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